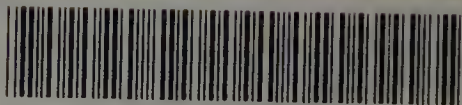


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DR EDITH ROMNEY

A Nobel



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III.

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

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DR EDITH ROMNEY.

CHAPTER I.

“HUGO !”

“O, these men, these men !”

Othello.

DURING that last week before the concert Sibyl was a great deal at the Hall. Mr. Barlowe's slightly-hinted dissatisfaction had made Mrs. Lorimer insist upon the most energetic efforts on the part of the amateurs. She even went so far as to invite those performers who had hitherto practised in Mona's drawing-room to dinner twice, for the rehearsal of the whole programme. In short, she was merciless, and the organist's gratitude for her help was great.

Sibyl, therefore, saw Mr. Lester a great deal. But it did not seem as if she made much progress in softening his anger. He was always as distant and formal as on that first evening. Her

charming manner, her sweet, arch smiles, appeared to make no impression upon him. He looked at her coldly and blankly when she tried, in her bewitching way, to draw him into talk. Once or twice, when she was most gracious, she had fancied she caught the faintest smile of something almost like scorn in the corners of his grave eyes, and the fact or fancy had curiously piqued her. Was he contemptuous of her friendliness? Did he believe she was merely coquetting? Of that she was not quite sure herself: she disliked being treated coldly, and it was as natural as breathing to make some attempts to produce a good impression again.

One or two trifles occurred to encourage her—they proved she had a small remnant of power over him. She was quick to notice that an unexpected address from her made him start, and that his eyes followed her whenever he believed her unobservant of his glance. One evening she dropped her handkerchief as she stood near the piano. Lester, who sat some little way off, apparently absorbed in a magazine, sprang forward and picked it up. As she took it their fingers touched, and either the stooping or the touch brought a quick flush to his face.

The next afternoon she sat alone in the library in the dusk. Violet had been summoned to see

callers, and Sibyl lay back in a great arm-chair, quite in shadow. The door opened, and Lester looked in.

“ When he sees me he will go away,” thought Sibyl.

He did not go away. He closed the door, and came and threw himself on the hearthrug, putting out his hands towards the red bed of coals.

“ How cold and raw it is to-day ! Even riding hardly warmed one. This is delicious,” he remarked, in a tone of satisfaction.

For some reason the friendly manner and voice made her heart beat faster. She kept motionless for a half-minute, and then leaned forward to say something. Her fair face was gentle and grave in the warm firelight.

Lester turned. He started, and stumbled to his feet. “ I beg your pardon,” he said, hastily. “ I—I thought you were Miss Lorimer.”

A chill struck her. A hot tear smarted in each eye.

Lester took out his watch. “ I may as well go and dress at once,” he muttered.

But Sibyl sprang up. “ If one of us must drive the other away, I will go,” she exclaimed. “ You need the fire, and I am quite warm.”

“ Miss Fane !—pray !” he deprecated.

She swept past him with a laugh, and he was

left with the confused impression of an angry glance flashed from wet grey eyes. That was the last day but one before the concert.

Next morning Sibyl was writing letters, and finding the duty rather irksome than agreeable, when Mr. Lester was shown into the room. Miss Fane slightly raised her eyebrows as she shook hands.

"Do you mind sitting by this fire while I am in the room?" she inquired, demurely, as she pushed forward a lounge. "But perhaps you have called to see my brother—I am sorry to say he has just started on his rounds."

"No—my errand is to you," said Lester, fumbling in his pocket.

"Really?" in innocent surprise.

"I was charged to deliver this note to you."

Sibyl read the note.

"It needs no answer," she said carelessly. "It is only a reminder from Mrs. Lorimer of a question she wishes me to ask Austin. I am sorry you have been troubled to bring it. You should have made Mr. Lorimer do so—what are young men for if they can't make themselves useful?"

"Lorimer has gone hunting."

"Why didn't you go?" she asked, serenely.

"I had an errand or two in the town," he replied.

“ Ah.”

“ I return to London to-morrow morning.”

“ Really ? ” she murmured. “ Then you will not hear this unique concert ? ”

“ No. You see, I have been privileged so greatly in hearing the practisings that I am almost resigned to my loss. I have done my duty. I have contented Mrs. Lorimer by buying the tickets she ordered me to buy.”

“ You have done nobly.”

“ Can I do anything for you when I get back ? ” he asked. “ Can I take any message to Mrs. Fane ? ”

“ Thank you,” said Sibyl. “ You are very kind. But I think it is hardly worth while to trouble you. I was just writing to Aunt Fane,”—she spoke very slowly. “ The fact is, I am sorry—I am very sorry—but the fact is, she has summoned me back to her at once. She cannot spare me any longer—she insists upon my returning to London for the coming season—and I am sadly afraid I must obey her. Indeed, I have hardly been able to get permission to stay over this concert.”

Lester’s face was downcast—quick changes were passing over it.

“ When do you go ? ” he asked, with constraint.

“ On Saturday.” She glanced at him, and

went on in the same sweet tone of regretful sympathy. "Indeed, I am sorry; I quite understand how unfortunate it is. But, you see, it can't be helped. Wanningster is not my home. and I must return to Aunt Fane's sooner or later. Don't you think by careful management it will be possible to a great extent at least to avoid meeting?"

"I hope so," he muttered involuntarily, below his breath.

"Ah, I am so glad you think so," she said. more cheerfully. "If we both try—"

Lester raised his eyes and looked across at her.

The words died on her lips as she met his direct gaze.

"You quite ignore the serious cause I have to avoid you," he said.

"I am afraid you won't let me ignore the fact that you are as unreasonable as the rest of your sex when you don't get exactly what you want," she said. Her eyes were very bright: she got up from her seat, and stood with her hands loosely clasped behind.

"Unreasonable!" he exclaimed, also rising.

"Yes. Most unreasonable," she repeated. calmly.

"Would you kindly explain?"—ironically.

“ Your unreasonableness ? ” with a light laugh.
“ I fear the task would be impossible ! ”

“ I think you would turn everything into jest,” he said, pacing about a little.

“ What else should I do ?—I always like comedy better than tragedy.”

“ I wish you would be serious for five minutes. I should like to know what you mean by my unreasonableness ? ”

“ How you worry the poor word ! ” said Sibyl.
“ Is it such a grave charge ? Candidly, don’t you think it is unreasonable for a man—mind, a *man*—to bear malice for—let me see, how long ?—for six months against a woman for changing her mind ? ”

“ Oh, that is how you put it ! ” He laughed.
“ Now hear my side. Do you expect a man who has been deluded, played with, thrown aside, and made a mockery of—do you expect a man who has had the dearest hope of his life in his grasp, as it were, one moment, and then snatched away the next—do you expect him to think and feel so little of all this that he can meet the woman who has made him suffer so like a mere acquaintance, and be ready to answer her with jests and laughter ? ”

Sibyl crushed her hands together. The strong terms of his side stung her like sharp strokes

from a lash. The pain, so new, so strange, so stinging, made her only perversely rebellious.

"But I suppose you do," exclaimed Lester. "What else should you think? You can surely have no heart, to treat other people's as you do."

"A barrister should be able to argue logically," she said, derisively. "But your remark is trite—as trite as—grapes are sour. A man always thinks that about the woman who is unfortunate enough not to be able to give her heart to him. It is the only possible explanation of the mystery, I suppose."

"But if a man hears one day that he *has* gained her heart," said Lester, facing her steadily, "and only four days after—"

The bright, vivid scarlet swept over her face. She threw back her head haughtily. "Was it not better to find out my mind at once than when it was too late?"

"You would not have found it out then," said Lester, in a low moved voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I should have made you happy—I loved—I worshipped you so!"

"You are very confident!" She laughed outright. "Too confident—did I not tell you that I was afraid?"

“All your remarks were characterised by perfect candour.”

“As soon as we were engaged I felt afraid,” said Sibyl. “I felt that I had lost my freedom—that I was a trapped creature—I belonged to some one. Oh, I could not endure it! I must be free—I must always be free. I will not marry.” She said this with a defiant, bewitching smile.

Lester looked at her as she stood opposite, slender, graceful, with her fair head thrown back a little, and calm, wilful, smiling eyes, and felt an insane desire to carry her off, in the fashion of the good old days—as the “strong man from the north,” for instance, managed his wooing. She bewitched, she tormented him; he was baffled and exasperated by her, and yet he longed to kiss her lovely, audacious lips.

“I think you are right,” he said, brusquely, as he took up his hat and riding-whip. “An inclining of mercy towards your unfortunate men fellow-creatures would prompt you to make that determination widely public, Miss Fane.”

“I might then escape hard accusations and much injustice.”

“It is possible you might,” he said drily.

“But now we have had another quarrel

about it, you will let bygones be bygones!" she said. "You will forgive me?"

"According to your own showing, I have nothing to forgive," he said, moving to the door; "and according to mine, there is no possibility of my forgiving you. Good morning."

Sibyl stood quite motionless for a few minutes after he had gone. She was very pale, her eyes were hard and bright, and her lips were pressed close together. "I will not go to-night," she said aloud. "I will not. 'Deluded'—'played with'—'thrown aside'—'made a mockery of'"—she went over the words that had struck her so sharply, and each repetition was sharper, keener pain than when he had uttered them. His harsh judgment of her behaviour to him was a severe shock. The unconscious belief, caused and fostered by the adulation and homage given her by men, that all she did and said to them must be charming, received its death-blow. She felt shaken, scared, dismayed. For some time she walked about the room unable to think of anything else. She had at first resolved not to go to the Hall this evening, but as the day wore away that resolution yielded to various considerations. Her absence would disappoint Violet, and upset their last practising; it would occasion more

talk than it was worth as she had no excuse of illness to send ; and, chief reason of all, if she kept away this evening Mr. Lester might suspect it was on his account ; he might even guess at the truth—that his words had had some effect upon her—and that thought was not to be endured. She dressed herself with great care and went.

All the performers assembled, for it was the last evening before the great event, and there was an atmosphere of excitement over the proceedings—each singer being painfully conscious of the importance of his or her part. Sibyl was the most unconcerned of all. As she came into the drawing-room before dinner, all in soft trailing white and flashing ornaments, she looked so fair and brilliant that more than one pair of eyes were dazzled.

“ Ah,” thought young Barlowe, with a pang of admiration, “ if she looks like that to-morrow evening, it will not matter how many mistakes she makes.”

While Lester turned hastily to the person next him, and plunged headlong into talk.

Oscar flushed and paled as Sibyl passed him, and watched her with unwilling admiration. At times he felt as if he hated her for her fairness. She glanced round after speaking to

Mrs. Lorimer, and smiled at him, even moved a step nearer to put an animated question about a trio she was to sing with him and Bertie.

Dinner was a very business-like meal. Sibyl was glad when it was over. She and Oscar and Bertie were lively in the extreme at their end, although Mr. Lester's grave, impassive countenance opposite was cold enough to check any mirth.

The girls took possession of the piano for some preliminary efforts before Mr. Barlowe appeared. and Sibyl sauntered into the conservatory.

She had not sat there in the fragrant shade for five minutes, when, raising her head, she found Oscar standing before her.

He laughed rather oddly. "How deep in thought you are!" he said, dropping into the seat beside her.

"One must think sometimes," she said. lightly, somewhat embarrassed at being caught in a reverie.

Oscar laughed as if he found her words delightfully amusing. He put one arm along the back of the seat behind her, and bent towards her with a curious, watchful look on his handsome face.

"Yes; it is a disagreeable duty," he mur-

mured. “You looked as if you found it very disagreeable when I came in.”

Something in his manner roused Sibyl’s alarm. His face was flushed, his eyes were restless and excited. She wished fervently that she had not left the safety of numbers in the drawing-room. “I must go in for the practising now,” she said coldly, and made a movement to rise.

But Oscar put out his hand to detain her.

“There is no hurry. Barlowe is putting Chutterworth through his song, and growing haggard with despair. We are not wanted yet. It is far pleasanter here.”

“Yes; but we must not keep the others waiting,”—icily.

“There is no danger of that. Why are you in such a hurry? Why do you speak like that? What can I have possibly done since we parted after dinner to offend you?”

Sibyl resigned herself to her fate—angry at the calm insolence of the last remark, and yet afraid of exciting him further if she showed any resentment. She leaned back, and said carelessly, “What an imagination you have!”

“I may have—but the most powerful imagination needs something to set it going.”

Sibyl looked thoughtful. “Isn’t there an

expression—it strikes me I have heard it—about a creative imagination?”

Oscar burst out laughing. There was a mirthlessness, a harshness, in his laughter she did not like.

“So you are going away?” he said, keeping the same watchful glance upon her, his colour changing as he spoke. “I heard the news just now.”

“It is quite true. I go home on Saturday.”

“That is very soon. What shall we do without you?”

“What you did before I came, I suppose. I have not the vanity to suppose Wanningster will suffer for my departure.”

“Do you really think that?”—staring at her.

“Think what?”

“That your visit has made no difference—that we can, as you say, go on as we did before—that *I* can, at least?”

Sibyl drew a long sigh—what she had dreaded was coming now, and she called her courage and self-possession to her aid, for it certainly seemed to her that her task would be less easy than it had been the first time in London. She shrank from the idea of a scene—she had not half her former serenity.

“Please don’t talk any nonsense.”

“I won’t—if you will tell me what to talk about,” said Oscar, making a great effort to control himself.

She drew a breath of relief.

“Ah, now you are sensible. I shall be very sorry to leave Wanningster. I have made some pleasant friends here. But I shall see them when I come to visit my brother; and I hope that when you are in London you will come and see me.” She smiled at him and rose composedly to return.

Oscar sprang up, and placed himself before her. He was terribly excited. He stared at her hard, with a burning glance that was fierce in its wretchedness; and, when she made a startled attempt to pass him, he seized her hand, and held it unawares so tightly that the rings hurt her soft fingers, and she pressed her lips in pain.

“Do you ask me to do that?—do you think I will ever knowingly put myself in your way again?” he cried, in low-toned vehemence. “I wish I had never seen your face again—I wish I had never seen it at all. You can have no idea how much I wish that! I have helped to give you some amusement during your stay in Wanningster, and I should be content with that fact, and the permission to see you when I go to London. I must not complain—I am not to

talk 'nonsense'—it is my own fault—I ought to have remembered my London episode."

"You are unreasonable—you are unjust!" exclaimed Sibyl, scornfully. "Can you blame me because you did not know your own mind? Let me go!"

He dropped her hand; the passion died out of his face. "You have made up the sum of your benefits to me," he said, slowly.

Just as he uttered the words Lester, who had entered the conservatory a moment ago, and was walking with bent head towards them, caught the sound of voices, and looked up. Seeing the two standing together, he turned at once to retreat. At the same moment the sound of his step reached Oscar. He glanced round, saw Lester, and making Sibyl a low bow, he disappeared through the door opening into the garden, near which they were standing, before she was aware of his intention.

There was a rustle of drapery, and a low agitated call behind Lester.

"Hugo!—Mr. Lester!"

He wheeled round. Sibyl was close behind, pale and startled, with heaving breast and imploring hands.

"Take me into the drawing-room," she faltered.

Lester seized her hands. "What is the

matter? has he been annoying you?” with a wrathful glance towards the door of Oscar’s exit.

“ I want to go back to the drawing-room,” said Sibyl. She tried to draw away her hands, but Lester held them fast. He bent towards her close.

“ Yes, yes—but you are not fit to face them yet. One moment, Sibyl—why did you call me that just now ? ”

She blushed hotly and looked down. “ I did not know what I was saying—I was confused ; ” and then vehemently, “ Oh, why do you ask me ? Let me go—someone will be coming—I forgot—it was a mistake.”

“ I wish you would make it again,” said Lester. “ Sibyl, dear, be true to me !—tell me honestly whether you have changed your mind unalterably as to what you said about caring for me last July. Don’t play with me any longer ! ”

His voice was earnest and entreating. Sibyl had a short struggle with herself, holding off from him, with her blushing face turned away.

“ You said you could never forgive me,” she murmured, half shyly, half archly.

“ Forgive me for behaving so badly this morning,” he said.

“ I will, if you will let me go now.”

He released her hands, and sorrowfully turned away. But Sibyl touched his sleeve,—“Hugo!”

“Well—is it a mistake this time?”

“Yes—if you don’t take it as it is meant,” she answered, saucily.





CHAPTER II.

BEFORE THE CONCERT.

“She stood up in bitter case, with a pale yet steady face,
Like a statue thunderstruck, which, though quivering, seems
to look

Right against the thunder place.”—MRS. BROWNING.

“Thou find’st to be too busy is some danger.”—*Hamlet*.

NEXT morning Edith received a visit from Mona. The young lady, in her clinging, trailing, curious dress, came into the dining-room with a hurried step, and both hands outstretched.

“Miss Romney! I’ve come to throw myself upon your compassion!” exclaimed she, breathlessly, and for a moment Edith feared a literal suiting of the action to the word. She took the outstretched hands in their long, untidy gloves, and guided her visitor to a chair.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked.

Mona sprang up again, excitedly. “I want you to do me a favour—a great, great favour!”

“If it is anything in my power—”

“ Oh, it is ! it is ! Promise you will help me, dear Miss Romney ! ”

Edith knew Mona too well to feel alarmed at this exaggerated agitation. She smilingly shook her head. “ Impossible to promise anything in the dark. Tell me what this immense favour is.”

“ If you don't grant it I shall be in despair,” cried Mona, clasping her long hands tragically. “ You are my only resource, and if *you* fail me, I don't know what I shall do.” And then, in a more rational manner, she added, “ I want you to take me to the concert this evening.”

“ Is that all ? ”

“ Ah ! you don't know what it means to me ! —Then you will take me ? ”

“ I don't want to go at all,” said Edith, frankly. “ Besides, I thought you intended going with Mrs. Chutterworth.”

“ I *did*,” said Mona, darkly.

Edith's lips twitched in spite of herself.

“ Won't you tell me a little more ? ” she suggested.

“ ‘ I must needs tell thee all ; ’ and when you hear, you will see how terrible the consequences of your refusal will be.” Mona threw herself upon the hearthrug and hugged her knees, while she gazed impressively at Edith. “ The fact is, I come fresh from a dreadful quarrel with Jack.”

This was not the first time Mona had made this confession; Edith bore the announcement, therefore, with fortitude.

"You will make it up before this evening," she said.

"Never!"

"Pray think better of it!"

Mona obstinately shook her head. "'When I'm determined, I always listen to reason, because it can then do no harm,'" she quoted.

"Remember you are to be married in a fortnight."

"I don't think that will stop our quarrelling—it will only give us more opportunities."

"It seems rather a sad prospect."

"'Where quarrelling is bliss, 'tis folly to be quiet'—and all married people do quarrel; it's the chief privilege of the state. Jack and I are only preparing for our felicity. 'I hope upon familiarity will grow more contempt.' But this quarrel is an exception to all the others—it is one that can never be made up! Why, Miss Romney, what do you think it was about?"

Edith tried to think of some cause trivial enough.

"Well, you must know," said Mona, "that I showed him the dress I mean to wear this evening,—actually took the trouble of putting

it on this morning,—and he positively said he couldn't admire it! And it's the loveliest costume!—a sort of tawny orange and peacock blue, with a fan of peacock feathers. So I told him, 'quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control,' that he was a Philistine, and that I wouldn't go with his mother and the girls to-night. You see they are going to finish up with a supper at The Elms; but I told Jack I wouldn't go. I sent him away quite miserable, and he deserves it—he deserves to be punished, and he *shall* be! Papa, of course, will be in attendance on Miss Robinson; and I have only you—if *you* won't take pity on me, and be my *chaperon*, I shall be the most forlorn creature under the sun. Sometimes I think I am already."

"But I like Mr. Jack, and I don't want to help to punish him," objected Edith.

Mona pleaded—she couldn't go with the Chutterworths, she couldn't go with her father, and yet she must do her part—Mrs. Lorimer would never forgive her for disturbing the arrangements at the last moment—although she would enjoy doing so because Jack would be so unhappy. In short, she had set her heart upon it. Edith did not wish to go, still less did she care to help Mona's amiable scheme for worrying her betrothed; but then Mona would certainly

keep her word about not going under the Chutterworths' escort, and compliance with her whim would probably bring the refractory young lady back to common sense sooner than anything else. So Mona got her own way, and that done, she gleefully produced a ticket.

"You go as a friend of one of the performers, so you must sit with the others," she said. "They have seats reserved for them at the side of the platform. All the hall is left for the public, and we have good hopes that it will be filled. We expect a grand success. Papa has given tickets to a lot of his work-people, and so has Mr. Chutterworth. He wouldn't have spent the money, only, as his own children are to take part, he is anxious they should not sing to empty benches—and then he likes to act the great man. And I am so glad you are going, Miss Romney! I shall always be grateful to you for taking pity upon me in my need—always!"

Edith was indifferent as to what part of the hall she sat in. Had she had her own way, she would have chosen a less conspicuous place; but she was in Mona's hands, and Mona settled it as she pleased. The old town-hall was of modest size, for it had been built in the sleepy days before Wanningster became enterprising and ambitious. There was, therefore, no absurdity

in its being engaged for the purpose of an amateur concert; nor were the performers' hopes of its being filled at all unreasonable. Indeed, as some of the richest families in the town were interested in its success, their names, their talk about it, and their friends' talk, almost made advertising unnecessary. But no means had been neglected, and expectations were sanguine.

Mrs. Lorimer arrived amongst the earliest. She lingered a while in the little room at the right of the platform, where the performers were assembling, and where they were to wait between their songs, spoke encouragingly to each, repeatedly adjuring them not to be nervous, and then, attended by Lester,—who, it is needless to say, had found business would allow him to stay for this important occasion,—she proceeded to her seat of honour, in the front row. Through a double eye-glass she watched the interesting operation of the seats filling, now and then making some graceful bow of recognition, now and then addressing her companion with a smile that showed her to be well pleased. Soon Mrs. Lorimer's attention was claimed by other friends, who had seats on those favoured benches, and a great deal of chatter and congratulation went on in the charmed spot.

To reach these reserved seats it was necessary

to cross the platform. An audience, before a performance, is generally good-humoured, and ready to find amusement in the merest trifle that will break the tedium of waiting. On this occasion, the back seats having filled rapidly with factory people and their friends, those members of the audience amused themselves by recognising any well-known person as he crossed the elevation, and awarding to each an amount of applause proportioned to his popularity. Mr. Chutterworth and Mr. Ardley received in this way public acknowledgment from their "hands" of their kindness in the matter of tickets.

Mr. Ardley raised his eyebrows, bent his head slightly, and passed quickly on. Mr. Chutterworth, on the contrary, showed full appreciation of what he felt to be a gratifying tribute to his personal popularity. He paused in the middle of the platform, gazed around with a complacent air, while he thrust his hand into the breast of his coat, and bowed stiffly and majestically to left, to right, to the front, and then stalked to a seat.

"Well done, Chutterworth," said Dr. Fullagher, from the one behind, giving his encouragement aloud, and accompanying it by a hearty clap on the shoulder—a kind of notice that ill suited the elevated dignity of the receiver's present state

of feelings. The doctor had come on purpose to see and hear Sibyl. When his tall, stout, well-known figure appeared upon the platform, a burst of hearty applause greeted him, which the doctor acknowledged by stopping midway, stroking his beard, and smiling ironically at the crowd. His survey was so leisurely that the applause stopped. Was he going to speak? But he shook his head mockingly and passed on, without deigning to notice the renewed clapping, much more vigorous and hearty than the first.

Mr. Milward also received his share of public attention. He smilingly and nervously bowed, hurried on, and, as they still clapped, bowed again, and so on, until he reached the seats.

Edith came in when the hall was almost full, for Mona had delayed as long as possible, in order to add a judicious amount of suspense to the tale of the unfortunate Jack's punishment. Edith passed through the withdrawing-room, lively with its moving, laughing groups of radiantly-attired girls, and sombre-suited men, rather in haste, hearing Sibyl's gay voice, and catching a glimpse of the bright hair, and silken folds of faint, pure mother-o'-pearl green. The association of Winifred's unhappiness with that elegant creature made Edith jealously anxious

to avoid speaking to her. She turned neither to left nor right as she walked quickly through the room, and up the two steps on to the platform. She was nearly half-way across, her tall, slender figure in sweeping black draperies and snowy opera-cloak conspicuously visible to every one in the hall, when the ominous sound of hissing was distinctly heard. It was faint, but unmistakable. After the laughter and good-humoured clapping it fell strangely on the ear. It struck Edith as if she had been shot. She stopped short, and looked up, as pale as death. There was a moment's silence, then a second and rather more courageous attempt. It must be for her. She turned to go back, turned to see Austin Fane just behind her, and at the same moment burst forth a loud and ringing applause—louder and warmer than any that had been given yet. *That* was for him; the hiss had been for her. He had stopped her retreat, and she went on mechanically towards the seats. Some one sitting at the end of one got up, and made way for her to reach the vacant place beside his, and then sat down again, his stout, big person shielding her almost entirely from the crowd. Afterwards, she remembered it was Dr. Fullagher; at the time, she was only conscious of a sense of relief in being suddenly shut

out and shaded from the scorching gaze of those cruel, "phalanxed faces."

Fane had heard the hiss as he sprang on to the platform, and, directly after, the hearty reception of himself. Instead of showing gratitude for his share of the public favour and approval, he stood still, and glared over the heads of the people towards the quarter whence the hiss came.

"It must be the fashion for the doctors to resent applause," said one young man to his neighbour.

"Looks as if a general bastinadoing would be the only thing to gratify him," murmured the neighbour.

"Why, he's off!—must have spotted the poor devil he means to make howl first."

Fane had turned sharply, and disappeared through the door by which he had just entered.

Two minutes after, Mr. Nicholson, seated at the end of a row of congenial spirits, and prepared for a critical enjoyment of the performance, was disturbed by a heavy grasp upon his shoulder. He turned, to see a fierce, white face alarmingly near his own, and heard an imperious whisper :

"Come out here a moment—I want to speak to you."

There was no resisting the persuasive force of that hand upon his shoulder; he was almost dragged from his seat, and marched out of the concert-room, down the stairs, and into the street. People were still coming in, and several poor persons stood about the entrance, watching the arrivals. Through these the greengrocer was rapidly steered. In a small entry between the town-hall buildings and a high wall he was let go and faced by his capturer. A gas-lamp hung from an iron arch over the opening to this retired spot, and Nicholson could see the doctor's face quite distinctly enough for all necessary purposes of observation. A confused notion flitted into his mind that no impulse of benevolence had actuated this impetuous seeking of a private interview, or, to use his simpler language, he saw he was "in for it." There was no time for flight, even had he possessed steadiness or breath for it.

"That infamous hissing was done by you and your friends?" demanded Fane, sharply, as he released him with something like a shake.

"In course it was," said Nicholson, a flicker of revengeful mirth wandering over his face. "And she didn't like it, what's more!" He chuckled.

"Very well. Then I shall knock you down."

The greengrocer had no time for any anticipatory enjoyment of the programme so tersely announced. He saw the doctor's eye choose a spot, and found himself on his back in the mud next moment. He was in no hurry to rise. Somewhat stunned and hurt, he managed, after a moment or two, to struggle to a sitting position, and there paused. Fane pulled off his right glove and flung it at him.

"*Get up!*" he said, between his teeth, with fierce, suppressed vehemence.

The man staggered to his feet and propped himself against the wall, a good deal cowed, and very much shaken.

"What's that for?" he growled.

"You know what it's for," said Fane, with the same intensity of passionate rage choking his voice, and blazing in his eyes. "You coward!—you evil-tongued villain! How dare you insult a lady? How dare you go on lying about her and slandering her? I wish I had a whip here—I'd thrash you to within an inch of your life!"

"You'd better try it on!" said the other, attempting a threatening air of bravado, but taking care not to meet those fierce, indignant eyes. "I'll have the law on you, doctor."

"You may have a dozen laws. I would pay fifty fines for the pleasure of making you scream!"

I'll let *you* have a taste of the law for slander if you give me any more of your villainy. Is that plain to you?"

"Why, I'm only sayin' what you as good as said yourself, anyway," said Nicholson, doggedly. He made a hasty movement aside, and almost fell, as Fane strode nearer a step with clenched hand.

"Say that lie again, will you?"

"I didn't mean it, doetor!" cried Nicholson, raising his elbow instinctively, and strengthening his assertion by an oath. "I'll never say another word about it—not to no man! I'll never mention the lady's name, if you like. There! will that do?"

"Can I trust you to keep your promise?"

"I'll swear it, sir, if you like."

"No, no," in disgust; "none of your vile oaths."

"I'll not speak another word about it, or about her—no, not for no man," said Mr. Nicholson, in a tone of virtuous resolve.

"Well! if you don't keep your promise——" the pause suggested direful vengeance. "It won't be only a word and a blow next time, I promise you!"

"Ain't a word and a blow enough?" muttered the culprit, ruefully rubbing his head. "And

there, I've lost 'caring of this beautiful concert—for they won't believe my word when I tells 'em I've paid for a place all square like a gentleman."

"You are not going into the hall again," said Fane, with sharp sternness.

"You're uncommon hard on a fellow, doctor," was all Nicholson ventured to whine.

"Hard on you? I'd like to break every bone in your body," was the encouraging answer, accompanied by that longing search of his countenance which made Mr. Nicholson greatly uneasy.

"Well—well," he said pacifically. "It's hard, though, on a poor man like me, to pay my shillin' and get nothin' for it—not even have it returned."

"Oh, stop your whining! There!" and Fane threw him a silver coin. "There," he repeated, as the shambling figure stooped painfully to feel for it in the mud; "go and get drunk, and then go home and beat——"

The other turned his lowered head sharply, and gave a sullen growl, like some angry animal. "Drop it, doctor! d— it! You needn't throw that in a man's teeth!"

"Go home and beat your wife," continued Fane, roughly. "That's your proper lawful amusement."

The man showed his teeth, and shook with passion. He raised himself stiffly, and glanced up at the strong, towering figure of his tormentor, as if measuring his chance, and then down again like a beaten hound.

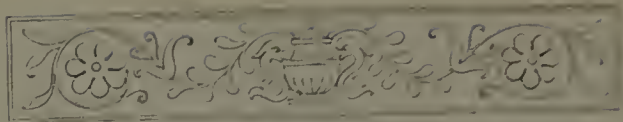
"I don't know about being lawful," he muttered hoarsely, rubbing the shilling backwards and forwards on his palm. No feeling of pride troubled his possession of the money tossed to him as this had been tossed. "The law's d—— interferin'. There's Dick Tuggles—he got drunk and kicked his wife and broke her arm, and she summonsed him, and they give him a fortnight's quod."

"Shameful!" mocked Fane. "But *you* need have no fear of the law, Nicholson—you know your wife will never summon *you*."

Again a passion of rage shook the man from head to foot. Tears of impotent frenzy stood in his bloodshot eyes, as he measured again the proportions of his taunting chastiser, and felt how broken, shattered, and nerveless he was. There was a grotesque pathos in his working face and in his choked voice.

"Don't madden me, doctor—don't! You know I can't do nothin', but I could kill you—I could kill you!"

"Pah!" cried Fane, and, turning on his heel, stalked back to the town-hall.



CHAPTER III.

A VIGIL.

“She heard not, saw not, every sense was gone.”

LANDOR.

THE concert had begun. Young Barlowe was playing an elaborate overture on the piano, and the late arrivals were hurrying to their seats. Fane chose one in the front, not caring to join his friends on the elevation, where talk and civility would be required from him in the pauses. He sat down where he could see Miss Romney, and prepared to endure because she was there. He had a fantastic feeling of being her protector from afar. Had she not stayed he would not have returned ; but he determined to watch over her as long as she remained in the place where that cruel insult had been inflicted upon her. But he paid no attention to the concert, which was unanimously declared to be the most successful amateur concert given in that room.

The hall was full, the audience was good-humoured and enthusiastic, the programme went smoothly, and the performers got through all creditably, and three of them brilliantly—these three were of course the two Barlowes and Sibyl.

Miss Barlowe's singing left all behind—her voice surpassed the voices of the amateurs as a lark's surpasses a sparrow's, as Dr. Fullagher observed, with characteristic comparison and courtesy; but Sibyl was very popular, and almost as much applauded, by sheer force of her charming appearance and bewitching smile. Miss Barlowe was short, slight, and plain, with a pale, serious face that showed intimate acquaintance with trouble and anxiety. To her the concert was a grave piece of business—a valuable experiment. As she stood, insignificant, in a plain black dress, relieved only by the scarlet flowers which Sibyl had ruthlessly pulled from Bertie's bouquet and insisted upon adorning her with, she gained no favour by appearance—there was no charm of smile or turn of head to prepossess even the most lenient of audiences, and make it overlook blemishes and unfinished work. It seemed generally understood that she was an artist, and therefore must be judged solely by merit. But after her first song there was no further sign of coldness on her coming forward.

Her hearers were won, and gave generous tokens of their approval in their demands for encores; they were not advanced enough to throw flowers, until Dr. Fullagher, who had clapped as heartily as the heartiest, suddenly seized the bouquet he had brought to throw at Sibyl's feet, and threw it deftly at the young professional's instead. It was an unusual demonstration for Wanningerster, and called forth imitators at once. Mr. Chutterworth, not to be outdone by the doctor, laid hands on his wife's enormous circle of flowers, and flung it with goodwill, but not with such nicety of aim as the doctor's, while even Mr. Ardley was roused to emulate the doctor's feat. Mr. Milward clapped with renewed violence instead, not feeling at liberty to despoil "his Adelaide."

The repressed nature of the young singer came to life under this appreciation. She picked up the first bouquet, and the light flashed into her dreamy eyes, and colour to her cheeks, as she curtsied low, and with a smile of proud acceptance.

"I am so glad," said Violet to her, as Miss Barlowe came from the platform, all aglow with her well-earned triumph.

"Yes, indeed," echoed Sibyl, cordially. She smiled whimsically. "But they won't listen to

us now. I think you had much better finish the programme, Miss Barlowe."

"Why," said Jack, who spent the intervals in nervously looking over his music and in smoothing his snowy gloves, "why, I don't see, Miss Fane, how she could do all; there are the part-songs, you know."

Mona threw up her head and hands with a tragic gesture of despair.

"Are you ready?" inquired Mr. Barlowe, approaching, music in hand, and casting an anxious eye over those who were to take parts in the next song—a glee.

"Mr. Chutterworth is just finishing his sixth lozenge," said Sibyl, serenely.

"You mean his sixtieth," said Mona. "He has lived on lozenges lately. He has bought so many pounds of them the last few weeks, that Mr. Spicer the chemist has been able to afford six reserved seats for himself and his family, and to deck out the women in flowers and fans for the occasion."

"Oh, I say!" remonstrated Jack, as he nervously tightened the clutch on his song, and followed to the dreaded, and yet exhilarating, ordeal.

The last thing on the programme was the laughing trio '*Vadasi via di quà.*' Sibyl was

led in by Bertie, and stood between him and Oscar. Her fair face was flushed, her eyes were sparkling; she was radiant with excitement and pleasure. The trio was capitally sung. Oscar manfully did his best, although his sore and angry heart made the business hateful to him. Even Bertie had cast off his first nervousness, and could sing with animation and dramatic effect. And there was the delightful feeling of ease that is felt at the close of a successful evening to inspirit them. They laughed well, and so infectiously that several in the audience laughed with them. Sibyl looked the impersonation of arch mirth; and when it was finished, and she made a laughing eurtsey in her inimitable frank way of taking the assemblage into her confidence, the applause was rapturous.

The elegant figure in its shining, beautiful dress had vanished, the music was over, and people began to crowd out.

To Fane the succession of different performers had appeared like the dimly-seen figures of a far-distant procession. The appearance of neither Violet nor Sibyl had roused him to attentiveness. He had remained motionless and absorbed, with rigidly impassive face. Violet had singled him out once, and glanced ready to smile; but she had received no glance in answer, and had felt

chilled and saddened by the dark gravity of his expression.

But Fane had been keenly alive to every motion near a certain lady's figure half hidden by the old doctor's portly form ; not Edith's own movements, for she had remained as still as if in a trance. Again and again he had glanced, and had perceived no change. He sat at an angle, and could command an almost full view of her, except when Dr. Fullagher bent forward to listen in rapt attention to Miss Barlowe, or to scrutinise the rows of faces in the body of the hall. Edith leaned back, her pale set face in its frame of dark hair relieved against the crimson cloak of a stout lady sitting at a slant behind. Her shoulders were covered by a soft white wrap edged with swan's-down, and her pure thin cheeks looked as white and cold as the down.

Fane could not tell what to make of her expression. He could not call it either shocked or startled. It seemed rather as if the shock had struck her so deeply that no outward traces remained ; as if she was transfixed, too deeply absorbed to be even conscious of what was going on around her.

As soon as the people began crowding towards the doors, he left his seat and stepped on to the platform. The friends of the performers were

moving about, making a little crowd in themselves, talking, laughing, and congratulating each other. Some were proceeding at once towards the waiting-room; Mrs. Lorimer and Lester had already reached it. Fane was challenged by questions on all sides as he steered through the groups. Mr. Milward, hurrying to speak to his daughter, jostled him, uttered an incoherent apology, and passed on with care upon his brow. Mr. Chutterworth, poising himself upon firmly and widely-planted feet, his waistcoat well displayed, and his thumbs hooked into their favourite armholes, was talking largely in the middle of the platform. He was delivering his valuable criticisms upon the Barlowes, and dilating upon what he was pleased to term the "hundredfold success of the entertainment," and his eye invited Fane to listen; but Fane evaded the appeal and passed on. Dr. Fullagher had advanced to the front, and was watching the people as they departed.

Fane approached Edith, who sat quite alone, and stood beside her. He said nothing; he could say nothing. In her abstraction of scorching suffering she would not notice any unconvictionality of conduct—indeed the commonplaces of conventionality were quite inappropriate here. He stood at the end of the bench beside

her, constituting himself silently her guard and protector—only too glad to let her keep him in mute attendance as long as it seemed good to her. It was out of the question that she should mix in that hateful crowd; he could act as a screen, and shield her from observation and the eyes of those who had treated her so shamefully.

The platform was soon cleared. Presently Jack appeared, walking quickly, and advanced straight to Edith. None of the performers had heard the hissing, for they were all in safe retirement, and engaged in chattering when it occurred; but it had seriously startled Mr. Milward. He did not know how much or how little reason there might be for it, and he justly considered that this was not the time and place to make inquiry. Such a demonstration on the part of a public—a public that had received himself and everyone else so graciously—was in itself condemning. And the brewer was easily alarmed. He shrank from any man or woman however slightly tainted with unpleasant notoriety. He worshipped the popular favourite, for, kind-hearted man as he was, he was too weak and timid to show a single allegiance. He was sorry for Miss Romney, and could he have given her any practical help in managing her affairs and leaving the town, he would have done so

readily, and liked her all the better for the service rendered ; but the hissing was too great a strain upon his friendship.

He hastened to Mona, therefore, and begged her earnestly to reconsider her refusal to go to The Elms. Mona turned a propitious ear to his pleadings. The excitement of the evening, the enthusiastic crowd, had stirred even her languid pulses. Perhaps she had not intended to carry her harsh treatment of Jack to the bitter end. anyway she was ready for more excitement, and the idea of returning home instead of going with her friends and talking everything over was tame indeed. She graciously agreed to drive with Mrs. Chutterworth and the girls, and to finish the evening in the way first proposed, and Jack was sent off with a beaming countenance to tell Miss Romney. Mona was too heedless and too engrossed with the talk and confusion around to think it necessary to make her own excuses.

"Mona is going to our house for supper, after all, Miss Romney," said Jack. "She wishes me to tell you not to wait for her."

His voice made Edith start. She turned her abstracted gaze upon his radiant visage as though making an effort to understand.

"Very well," she said, mechanically.

"I thought she'd come round at the last,"

said Jack, with confidential glee. "Shall I take you to your carriage? Oh," as Fane made a movement, "I beg your pardon, doctor. Good evening, good evening!" and the happy Jack gave the passive hand that was hardly raised to meet his a cordial clasp, and rushed back to the delightful hubbub of the withdrawing-room.

Edith looked round with a bewildered expression. The hall was nearly empty. She rose to her feet and paused a moment, steadying herself with a hand upon the back of the seat in front. Fane moved aside to let her come out, and offered his arm. She took no notice—he was not sure that she even saw his movement—and crossed the platform. As they passed the door of the withdrawing-room, which opened upon the corridor leading to the stairs, Violet's sweet, anxious face peeped out. Within were figures in light evening dresses shrouding themselves for the homeward drive; soft laughter and the buzz of merry voices floated out. Violet, dainty in delicate blue draperies, with a lace scarf over her head, smiled with quick pleasure as her betrothed came by.

"There you are, Austin. We are quite ready. I wanted to say good night," she said.

"Wait a moment, Violet," he answered; "I will come back directly."

Something in the low, hurried whisper, some scarcely controlled harshness caused by agitated feeling, made Violet's smiling face assume a look of wondering deprecation. She drew back into the room, hurt and puzzled, and all at once tired and out of spirits.

"Pray take my arm," said Fane, at the top of the stairs, bending to offer it again with appeal in tone and look.

"No, thank you," said Edith, and his conscious ear fancied there was a shrinking haste in her voice.

Her carriage had just driven up in its turn, and there was no need to wait in the still lively entrance.

"Miss Romney's carriage," shouted the policeman on duty. The loud and public utterance of her name brought to Edith a return of that burning, trembling horror which had paralysed her in the concert-room. She was hastening to hide herself from light and observation in the brougham, and had reached the hall door steps, when Fane hurriedly exclaimed, "Your cloak!"

It hung over her arm, for she had carried it with her to save the delay of looking for it in the cloak-room.

"Ah, I forgot," she said, catching her breath, and giving the cloak to him.

He put it on, and as he drew it round her throat, and bent to fasten it, the crushed, intense misery of her white face wrung his heart. The full realisation of his impotence to help swept over him, and not only that, but the completely unhelpable nature of her trouble. Nothing could make amends for the exquisitely painful experience she had gone through in this building. Her life would never lose those hours—it could never be as if it had not known them.

If only there might be one word between them to soften the desolation of her trouble!—one word to break through the silence and distance, if it were only a faltered out “Forgive me.” If she could have turned to him, confident of reading sorrowing sympathy in his thoughts; then, indeed, much of the bitterness would be taken out of his remorse. Instead of being able to give or receive any grain of such comfort, he was the only half-innocent cause of this last stroke.

The cloak was fastened. Edith uttered a faint mechanical “Thank you,” crossed the pavement, and got into her carriage. Fane took the handle out of the policeman’s hand, and shut the door himself; as he did so he glanced at her with a wistful doubtfulness as to his mode of leave-taking. She was leaning back, with straining

eyes directed straight before her ; evidently he was quite forgotten. He lingered a moment, with his hand on the door, reluctant to have her go without a word, and more reluctant still to force the fact of his presence upon her by speaking any word.

“Come, sir,” said the policeman, with hoarse impatience, for much shouting had affected his voice ; “the other carriages are waiting for their turn.”

Fane turned away, and Edwards drove at a smart trot up the street.

Fane elbowed his way almost roughly through the groups of people coming out, heedless of acquaintances and of his popularity, and walked into the room where the chief performers still lingered.

“Oh, there you are,” exclaimed Mrs. Lorimer, in the alert tone of one who has been kept waiting. “We couldn’t go without a word, but it is getting late. What did you think of the concert ? I was so sorry you lost your seat near us—most unfortunate. Tell me how you enjoyed it. Really, it was satisfactory for amateurs, don’t you think ? I hope you were contented with our little songstress’s performance ?” giving Violet a playful tap on the shoulder.

Violet raised her sorrowful, wondering eyes to

his. She took no further pleasure in the evening's excitement. Austin had no words or looks of praise to give, and she cared for no one else's if that was the case. What could be the matter with him? why had he spoken so strangely to her five minutes ago? why did he look so strange? His eyes were almost fiercely wretched, his lips were set, and his face pale as if with physical suffering. To her mother's remarks he merely muttered an incoherent reply; he did not look at her, Violet.

Sibyl swept towards them to say good night, with Bertie, Mr. Lester, Dr. Fullagher, and, at a greater distance, young Barlowe, in attendance. There was some settling of arrangements. Sibyl was going to The Elms; the doctor intended escorting her to the door, and then driving home. Austin, of course, would go with them, as he was due at the Chutterworths' supper. He declared his intention of going home first to see if there were any messages.

Dr. Fullagher raised his eyebrows, and murmured something about "devotion." This drew upon him well-deserved punishment, for Mrs. Lorimer at once expressed cordial approval of what Fane had said, adding that severe responsibilities rested upon the shoulders of a medical man.

"I'm afraid they do," said Fullagher, casting an innocent glance at Violet. "Well, you can still drive with us," he added to his friend.

"I shall walk," was the answer.

"Very well. I suppose you will turn up in time to bring Miss Sibyl home," said the doctor, following Sibyl and her escort to the door. Arrived there, he stopped short. "I say, there's no need for this rabble," he said, eyeing the young men disapprovingly. "I am still equal to the task of seeing one lady to her carriage. Say good night, young men, and go with your proper protectors." And having cleared the coast by this delicate manœuvre, the doctor offered his arm with a "*Now, Miss Sibyl!*"

Fane conducted the Lorimers to their carriage and saw them depart, and then started for his solitary walk. But instead of turning towards Monk Lane, he struck into London Road. The streets were quiet. A slight fall of snow earlier in the evening had made the pavements wet, and the light from the gas-lamps cast weak gleaming reflections on the shining flags. The sky was not to be seen, so dark was the night above the house-roofs, seeming to hang over the town in palpable form and weight. Two or three carriages from the town-hall overtook him, rattling by with a flash of lamps and disappear-

ing in the gloomy shadows ; the few pedestrians abroad passed from the dully-lighted spaces round the lamp-posts into dim obscurity again. Fane strode along swiftly, with hands deep in his ulster pockets, his hat crushed over his eyes, and his eyes bent down on the ground.

London Road grew wider ; the melancholy shuttered shops were left behind, houses grew larger, the air came in fresher, keener gusts as the road began to slope up gradually towards the racecourse. Fane raised his head and glanced around. This was the walk he had taken on that May evening after first hearing Miss Romney's name. These were the houses he had looked at, considering the chances of there being enough work to be got out of them. Remembrance of the very frame of mind in which he had walked that evening recurred to him ; he remembered the carelessness, the indifference, the queer mingling of disgust and hardness with which he had thought of Dr. Fullagher's rival—the contemptuous balancing of her fate, whether he should stay or not. He remembered his arrogant declaration that she should be defeated, that she ought to learn how presumptuous she had been in attempting man's work ; he remembered all this—and her face this evening.

Half-involuntarily he had paused, arrested by

the strong current of recollection. He almost turned to retrace his steps, and then, pressing his lips together, he walked fast forward again. The opening of Princess Road was reached, and he wheeled sharply into it. As he neared No. 20, however, his steps began to lag; he was walking quite slowly when he came to it.

The house was darkened, except the dining-room window; through its curtained panes came a faint glow. He passed the house, and re-passed it two or three times, always with eyes fixed upon that dimly-lighted lower window. The wind was bleak and fitful, every now and then a single flake of snow was drifted against his face. The lights in the houses near were almost all extinguished.

Presently the deep bell of St. Matthew's struck eleven. Fane roused himself in the confused manner of one who is drugged. He cast a lingering look at the window, and, with a half-formed wish that he had seen it darkened, and could believe that she had at least made an effort to forget herself in sleep, he walked on to The Elms.

The drawing-room there, the gaily-dressed people, the talk and laughter, were all a harsh confusion; the hatefulness was intense and jarring, and yet everything, everyone, and every

sound, had for him only the unreality of a dream. He took Sibyl home as soon as it could be managed. She was tired, and went up-stairs humming in soft, dreamy absence of mind some fragment from Miss Barlowe's first song, and left her brother locking up for the night. That duty done, he sat over the fire in the library. But not for many minutes. He was restless, and could not endure inaction; the bitter sighing wind, the brooding, intensely dark night sky, the stillness, affected him so strongly that he seemed to be again walking outside amid their influences. They attracted him and drew him forth. He could not remain still; he must see for himself if that weary heart and brain had sought rest.

He noiselessly let himself out into the street. By this time hardly anyone was astir. Houses were dark. The hush of night rested over the town. Fane walked fast, and soon reached Princess Road; and as he glanced at Edith's house, he saw that it was only as he had expected—the light still burned dimly behind the blinds of the dining-room.

He paced up and down without. That was all he could do—keep a dark vigil outside her closed door. And as he walked he thought only of her. The woman he had promised to marry,

his work, his prospects of worldly success—all the hundred and one things that had made life pleasant and interesting to the strong, vigorous, free-hearted man—shrank away as mists and visions; the only reality was the suffering, quivering soul behind that shrouded window.

How long he paced up and down he knew not, nor how many times he passed her house. The fourth meeting with the policeman on patrol interrupted him. He had not consciously noticed the man before, but this meeting had all the effect of wearisome repetition, and reminded him that he was not acting with the sane restraint of every-day life. He cast a last glance at Edith's window, and the helpless anguish of anxiety strengthened his desire to see it darkened. Ah, why would she not rest? why did she let the brutal cruelty of those low people hurt her so deeply? It suddenly occurred to him that she might not know the real slight cause of that insult; she might imagine it to be far more important than it actually was. Even supposing she connected it with that absurd report about poison, how was she to know that that had been simply the malicious lie of one ill-conditioned man? That report had of course reached her ears,—he had himself forgotten it until reminded by Nicholson's evil leer this

evening,—and who knew in how contorted a form? His share in it was probably so falsely represented that she might even now be supposing him guilty of wilful slander against her. The idea startled him to a feeling of absolute terror. It must be so. And that explained her recoil from him this evening. What could she have thought of him, forcing himself upon her as he had done immediately after *that*? It was intolerable, intolerable! Something must be done; he could not have her believe him capable of such atrocity; he must see her, he must explain.

He had left Princess Road by this time, and in the hurry of these thoughts was walking impetuously homewards. He must see her to-morrow; he would call. And then it struck him that after to-night she would certainly deny herself to him. Her forbearance so far in permitting his advances towards acquaintance was wonderful, but after this evening even her courteous tolerance must give way.

No, there was nothing to be done. The whole affair was beyond his control; his carelessness and hardness had sown, and he must reap; but surely a bitter hundredfold! He would explain the true state of the case at every opportunity. The number of those opportunities,

the chatter to be endured the next few days, made him heartsick even then. Perhaps the truth might get round to *her* ears; she might learn by degrees that this evening's demonstration was only the clumsy revenge of a besotted wretch, and not a public repudiation. But she could only learn the truth of his share in the matter from himself; only he was able to explain Nicholson's wilful misapprehension; and again he declared it must be done. He would do all in his power to get a hearing; he would risk any rebuffs. If she positively refused to see him, he would write his explanation.

By the time he reached home he had decided to write first, asking her to grant him an interview. That seemed the best plan. He shut himself up in the library, where the fire had died out hours ago, and began his task at once. What was he to say? How much was he to hint of his motive? He made several attempts, and at last decided upon the simplest and frankest, as being the only style to use in addressing her.

"DEAR MISS ROMNEY,

"May I call and see you? I have an explanation to give of last evening's occurrence in the town-hall, and as I consider myself indirectly responsible for what happened, I beg most earnestly that you will grant me a hearing.

"AUSTIN FANE."



CHAPTER IV.

HUGH.

BETWEEN one and two o'clock next day, a gentleman in the severest of clerical costumes descended from the London train to the Wanningster platform, and hastily leaving the station, made the best of his way towards Princess Road. He walked fast, with the air of a man who knows his way, and who has a purpose before him.

It happened that Sarah, having gone into the dining-room to see for herself how far Eliza had carried out her direction of "keeping up a good fire," caught sight of the gentleman passing the window. Uttering an astonished "Well, I never!" she bustled out into the passage, and opened the door just as the clergyman put forth his hand to ring.

"Mr. Hugh!"

"Well, Sarah," was the calm salutation.

"Come in, sir, come in! It's bitter cold," she

said, making haste to close the hall door, and to usher him into the dining-room. This was not to be done as quickly as Sarah's impetuosity desired. Hugh required time for the careful wiping of his boots, the orderly disposal of his hat and umbrella, and finally the taking off and hanging up of his great-coat. These preparations made, he allowed himself to be led into the warm, comfortable-looking room. But he refused to take the arm-chair Sarah pulled forward to the hearth, choosing instead a straight-backed chair near the window. "Just the coldest place in the room," grumbled Sarah, privately, "unless he had sat close to the open door; but that was Mr. Hugh's way all over."

"Is Miss Romney in?" he asked.

Sarah nodded. "She's in right enough, but—she's engaged just now."

"Do you think she will be long engaged?"

"Well, that's what I can't tell you, Mr. Hugh," said Sarah, making a great show of putting a chair more strictly in its place. "But you aren't in a hurry, surely? Coming from London, you'll be staying a day or two? You don't look anything to boast of. I'm sure; a holiday would do you a deal of good."

"I never take holidays," said Hugh, a slight emphasis in his measured monotone; "I must

work while it is day. I only came for a few hours."

He was tall and peculiarly slight in figure, a natural slenderness much attenuated by hard work and insufficient nourishment. His face, pale, wan, and shaven, had the wasted lines of an ascetic; the thin lips were pressed together in suffering dejection, the light-blue eyes bore out the same expression. The work, the holy interests and observances with which he had filled his life, did not seem to have made him happy, nor even to have brought content; the restfulness of peace did not brood in his haggard eyes.

Sarah watched him as he spoke with a queer struggle of expression on her face—a kind of pitying amusement and affection. He was "one of the family," and, thus distinguished, an object of her liking and respect; as a private individual, however, she regarded him—and especially his "ways"—with only slightly qualified contempt.

"Well," she said, falling into brusquerie, "it seems to me that both too much work and too little work's bad for folks, and I don't know which is worst. It's a pity everyone can't have a fair share," she added, sighing, and flicking the hapless chair with her apron. "It's a great pity. But, anyway, you must have something to eat,

Mr. Hugh, and I'll bring it in at once; it's no good waiting for Miss Edith."

"How is Miss Edith?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, I've known her better," was the somewhat evasive answer, ungraciously given, and Sarah whisked out of the room.

She brought in the tray of refreshments herself, and after she had placed everything she still lingered, moving and removing them, as if she found an insurmountable difficulty in arranging the dishes to her liking.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Hugh," she burst out awkwardly at length. She might not possess great veneration for Mr. Hugh's judgment, she was jealously loyal to her young mistress, but, after having endured some weeks of exceptional "worriting," Sarah could not resist indulging in the relief of speaking out her mind to a member of the family. To use her own words, she was "worried past bearing," and even a remote chance of obtaining help and counsel was not to be despised.

Hugh glanced at her inquiringly.

"I'm that miserable I don't know what to do," said Sarah, twisting her apron in spasmodic nervousness, a great sob breaking her voice.

"What is the matter, Sarah?"

"It's about Miss Edith, sir," she said, resolutely gulping down the sob.

An expectant interest gathered in Hugh's eyes. He was not unprepared to hear certain news of his sister.

"I as good as told you a fib just now," said Sarah, "when I said as she were engaged. I suppose you thought I meant someone was with her?"

"Your words were certainly calculated to give that impression," said Hugh, serious rebuke in his tone. "And did do so," he added.

"Then I suppose I've told a lie for once in my life, 'cause folks says a lie's what deceives." Sarah spoke with some defiance. "But I couldn't find it in my heart to disturb her. Look here, Mr. Hugh, she never went to bed at all last night; she was out to a concert, and I lit the lamp ready for her against her coming back, as she likes the light of the lamp better than the gas; and for that I don't wonder, for the gas in this town is no more fit to be ealled gas than—than a tallow dip isn't. And I ought to know, for I lived in L—— fifteen years, and the gas there give a beautiful light; I ain't seen none like it since." Sarah, indeed, had never ceased to regret her banishment from L——, regarding everything in Wanningster in

unfavourable comparison with her favourite town. "And so I got a good fire ready, and the lamp, and a nice little supper, and had all waiting for her. I sat here and heard the carriage, and opened the front door for her. When I'd locked it again for the night, I come into here after her, and asked how the concert had been, quite cheerful. It wasn't a regular concert, you know, Mr. Hugh; some ladies and gentlemen in the town here known to Miss Edith was singing at it. I've seen some on 'em myself, and that's why I asked. Lor, I got quite a fright! She had dropped off her cloak, and sat in that chair at the table, looking straight before her, and as white as a ghost. I thought she must be ill, and yet I daren't speak a word. I've seen her in trouble and sorrowful enough lately, God above knows, but never as strange as that. Then she saw me staring at her, and asked what I said. I a'most cried," said Sarah, clearing her throat energetically. "As for the concert, she seemed to know nothink about it. Well, when I came down this morning—for I got down before Eliza as it happened, and a good thing I did, too,—she was still here, in all her concert finery, and the lamp was still burning, although it had got almost to the last drop of oil, and I had filled it fresh before lighting it. 'Oh, Sarah,' she says,

quite dazed-like, 'is it morning?' 'Dear heart,' says I, and I'm sure I a'most trembled, what with one thing and another, seeing her so strange, and knowing nothink what the matter was, 'do go and lie down, for mercy's sake,' I says, 'and get some sleep.' 'Yes, I think I will now,' she says, and she's been in her room ever since. So I do hope as she's asleep, and that's why I couldn't find it in my heart to wake her any sooner than need be."

"From what you said I concluded she was engaged with a patient."

"Patient? Precious few of *them*," exclaimed Sarah. "I hate the very name of patient; if she hadn't had to do with nasty ailing people all this would have been saved. It's that doctorin' as 'as done it."

"Yes," said Hugh, with melancholy decision, "that was all a mistake."

"And why should it be?" cried Sarah, veering sharply. "Why should it be a mistake? It wouldn't be if people had kep' faith with her. No one called it a mistake when she had a'most more patients than she could manage. If folks had not begun as they didn't mean to go on; employin' of Miss Edith when there wasn't a decent doctor in the place, and then throwin' of her off as soon as ever this strange fellow come.

I call it disgustin' behaviour, and I wish I could get a few of them to say so to."

Sarah's faith had, as it often happens, failed her when put to proof. The predicted losses had come to pass, and with a completeness that left no doubt as to the afflicting nature of the "dispensation," yet the old servant was uncheered by any comfort to be found in the fact that it was "the Lord's doing." It had been easy to recommend submission to a future chastening when Edith was well and prosperous; but Sarah lost that sustaining view of the case when she saw her darling mistress desolate and suffering. Realisation of its being the doing of God was but faint and fitful, and brought no meek acquiescence from Sarah; nor did it prevent her attempting to improve matters. She hailed Hugh's visit as at least a break in the monotony of the silent misery to which she was condemned by her part—the hard part of passive onlooker. The mere relief of being able to talk to a member of the family about her mistress was immense. Mr. Hugh was not fit to hold a candle to Miss Edith, in her devoted estimation, yet, as Miss Edith was so strangely unpractical and unlike herself, there was an opening for Mr. Hugh to distinguish himself in the cause of common-sense, if he would only rouse up and

use his advantage. Sarah wistfully hoped he might.

Hugh, having finished a frugal repast, listened with his elbows on the table and the tips of his fingers touching. His notions were strict on many subjects, and very strict as to the impropriety of mentioning family affairs to a servant, even one so old and valued as Sarah; therefore he would not repeat his unguarded remark about his sister's injudicious choice of a profession. He resisted the temptation to assure Sarah of her mistake—that *he* had always held the same opinion, success or non-success; and the temptation was not contemptible, for what she told him made the certainty and extent of Edith's mistake press upon him with peculiar force. Perhaps he did not fully realise the old servant's faithful identity with his family, and her devotion and friendship; or he may have been conscious that he did not hold the chief place in her esteem. Whatever might be the reason, he did not feel as much at home with her as he might have done with one he had known since childhood. And it may have been this holding back and reserve which partly affected Sarah's feelings towards him; she may have resented the stiffness and shyness as denying her claims to friendly, sympathetic treatment.

Hugh said nothing in answer to Sarah's outburst of anger against the people; he only sighed and looked with far-away attention in his haggard eyes.

"Oh, goodness!" cried Sarah, giving herself a twist of desperation; "to think as things should come to this! to think as she should be treated so by a pack of nobodies who ain't fit to black her boots, let alone her wastin' her time and strength makin' of them well! and to think she should be so cast down about them! *Brutes*, that's what I call them! I wish to goodness she'd pluck up a bit of spirit and leave the whole set on 'em, and this horrid place as well; but I don't believe as she's heart to do nothink, she seems more mazed than anythink else. I'm glad you've come, Mr. Hugh," she said, looking at him wistfully. "I hope you'll do your utmost to get her out of this hole. It's killin' her, that's what it's doin', and I've just to stand by and see it." Her voice broke; there was a rush of tears, which she valiantly attempted to restrain, turning very red and contorting her face alarmingly as she looked down at the table, making abrupt passes with her hand over the cloth. "You'd hardly know her, sir, she's that altered; and to think how bright and healthy-lookin' she was when we first

come ! It's simply sickenin', simply sickenin'," she added, abruptly, her eloquence failing all at once under the irresponsiveness of her listener.

"I am very sorry to hear all this," said Hugh, gravely. "I think, Sarah, I must get you to tell Miss Edith that I am here now. Time will not wait for us, and of course I should like to see as much of her as possible the few hours I can remain."

"Yes, I'll tell her," said Sarah, speaking in a subdued manner after her emotion.

Hugh had risen and gone to the window. It was evident he had finished his meal, so Sarah raised the dish of meat, and carried it away with her.

Hugh stood looking out while he waited for his sister. He was not kept waiting long. Eliza came in, cleared the table and departed, and then the door opened again and Edith entered.

"Hugh !" she said, speaking with cordial pleasure, although weakly, and a faint smile quivering on her face.

"How do you do, Edith ?" he replied, kissing her.

They stood a moment, hands touching shoulders and arms, as they had kissed, surveying each other. She was certainly sadly

altered ; but Hugh was not the man to be easily shocked at physical ravages. Still, he did infuse some real concern into his voice as he remarked. " You do not look well."

The scrutiny in his eyes made Edith's hands drop. She turned away, instinctively shrinking from observation, and walked to the fire.

" Come and sit down, Hugh. When did you get here ? Sarah should have told me at once."

Hugh brought a high chair, and sat down opposite. " She thought you were sleeping, and did not wish to disturb you."

" No ; I was only lying down. How are you ? Are you over-working yourself, as usual ?"

" There is no such thing as over-work in my calling."

" But you look worn," said Edith.

" I think I may say the same about you."

" Oh, that is nothing. I have been a little out of sorts lately ; it is nothing. Tell me, have you seen Winifred ?"

" I saw her on Wednesday," he began, in a tone of measured opening, but Edith struck in with the same nervousness—

" How does she get on with them ? Did she tell you ? Do you think she is comfortable amongst them all ?"

A moment's reflection would have reminded her that, however great was Winifred's discomfort, she was not likely to confide in her uncle. But Edith was only anxious to put off the catechising and inquisition prepared for her. She herself, and her affairs, were to be talked over, and experience had taught her what this meant with her brother. Disapprobation, criticism, and advice he had always dealt freely to her. She could laugh and feel untouched when her father lived and she believed in her powers and her choice, but what armour had she now? Must not every word of disapproval, uttered with the authority of an opinion confirmed by the event, quiver like a sharp arrow when she was unprotected by even the thinnest veil of self-confidence?

"Winifred told me nothing about that," said Hugh. "There is no reason why she should not be comfortable. There are a great many children, certainly; the house is small and noisy, and of course she will not have the ease and luxuries she has no doubt enjoyed here; but Mrs. Noel is a kind-hearted woman, and will do her best. I was more interested in hearing about you than in asking after the fancies of a girl."

"Winnic does not indulge in fancies."

"I know much less about her than you, it is true," replied her brother. "She is as yet too young to be involved in important affairs; you are different, inasmuch as you have adopted a man's career—I need not now remind you how unwisely."

"No."

"For," went on Hugh, "from what I could gather from Winifred, I should say you ought to be fully aware, from the course of events, how injudicious your choice has been. The question now is——"

"What did you hear?"

"Not very much, definitely. She appeared uninformed accurately about your position; but she told me, in answer to questions, that your practice was considerably diminished, and that there was every danger of its continuing to decrease, owing to the growing popularity of a new and attractive doctor. While, from something Sarah let fall in her anxiety as regards your health, I gather that you have little or no practice left."

He paused. Edith's hands were clasped round her knees, and she was looking into the fire. She said nothing. Her silence was not disagreeable to her brother. This was the first time he had been allowed free and uninterrupted

expression of his sentiments about her conduct. He was conventional to the tips of his fingers, and it was a real trouble to him that his own sister, bearing his own name, had taken such a remarkable and strong-minded course; he felt a shyness in acknowledging the relationship; he preferred the fact to remain buried in the sacred oblivion generally accorded to the notoriously distinguished members of a family. But if a woman had disgraced herself in being a successful doctor, how tenfold was she disgraced when her practice fell to pieces, and she was left to be pointed at by the finger of scorn! The thin-skinned and sensitive clergyman writhed cruelly under this accumulated misfortune. He had a feeling that Edith herself was to blame; the least she could do was to justify her act in the eyes of all the world by unchecked prosperity. She had made herself unpleasantly conspicuous, and, through her, her family—an unpardonable deed for a woman, and the sister of Hugh Romney.

“If that is the case, and I presume Sarah must know,” he went on, “you stand in a most serious position—most serious. I was so terribly startled on Wednesday—for of course I understood what conclusions must be drawn from Winifred’s remarks—that I could get no sleep that night. Your situation struck me as being

terrible. I dared not think what serious consequences were involved. Have you begun to make arrangements for leaving Wanningster?"

"Not yet," said Edith.

Hugh moved quickly in his straight-backed chair. "Have you considered what is to be done next?"

"I — no — not yet," she said, with weary patience.

Her brother got up. "My *dear* Edith!" he exclaimed, in emphatic expostulation.

"I have not felt well enough," she said, moving slightly, and putting forward her excuse with a pitiful sense of its reality, and yet of its utter futility, as far as her brother was concerned.

Hugh was pacing up and down in the excitement of his exasperation at this unheard-of folly.

"You must admit now that I was right," he said. "You have made a trial, and you have failed. You must surely now acknowledge that the medical profession is most undesirable for a woman. It is a thousand pities you ever entered it—a thousand pities! I spoke strongly at the time, and I was unheeded. My poor father always let you have your way——"

"Hugh! don't!" came in a voice of sharp anguish. She covered her face for a minute, trembling. The careless mention of that dead

name was intolerable to her. She missed him, she wanted him, she longed for him. *He* would have understood. His tender sympathy would have eased her aching heart; the touch of his dear hand might have opened the fountain of her tears, and brought her relief. He would have saved her, too, from the laceration of her brother's reproaches. As it was, Hugh would say his say unmolested.

Hugh glanced at her.

"Of course I remember how devoted you were to him," he said, apologetically. He took a turn in silence, then broke forth almost impetuously—"All this hyper-sensitiveness, this prostration of spirit at your defeat, this unpractical putting off of a decision, prove the unfitness of your sex for the work you undertook. A man would accept failure in one place as a mere sign that he could not do there, and would at once try another. The contingencies of modern life do not allow us time to waste in unavailing regrets. People in our position simply cannot afford to do so. I do not mean that you ought to start in practice again; I hope this very convincing proof of the inexpediency of a woman's practising medicine will prevent any such madness. But you ought to consider your expenses. This house is still on your hands, I presume; you are keeping up the same

establishment of servants. In short, my dear Edith, it will be a wonder if you do not involve yourself in debt and difficulties ; in fact, you *will* do so unless you speedily look after your affairs."

"Edwards leaves me at the end of this month," she said, an expression of anxiety crossing her face. "I shall sell the horse and carriage as soon as possible. I don't think I shall incur any money difficulties ; you know I was—I was very prosperous for two years."

"I trust you will not," he said, in a heartfelt, though not very hopeful, tone. "And you yourself, what do you intend to do?"

"I do not know. There is plenty of time to think of that."

"Plenty of time ! How can you form your plans if you do not decide what to do ? At least, you do not meditate another attempt at practising—you will give up the profession ?"

"I don't know. I can't think about it yet. Everything is dark to me."

A pause. Hugh came and sat down again.

"I cannot for the life of me see why you wish to be different to other women," he said, in much-tried perplexity. "No work you can do will alter the fact that you are a woman. For that matter, there are plenty of occupations suitable

for women. There is art, music, literature, or even nursing; a woman may follow any one of these and not derogate from her feminine delicacy and dignity."

"But if she has not a talent for one of them?" said Edith, with that weary patience of voice and manner so strangely new and unnatural to her.

"You have enough to live upon; there is no need for you to work at all for a living. If you have no special talent you should be content to find interest in a lady's ordinary occupations."

"Hugh, would you like to have your work taken from you, and be condemned to live the life of idleness?" she asked, almost appealingly.

"As to that," said Hugh, "I am a man. The cases are not parallel. A man is expected to work in the world. Look here, Edith. Why should you not come and live with me, and help me in work for the Church? If you have such a craving for work, I could give you plenty, and the best and most suitable kind for a woman. I do not see why you were not content to do that before."

"I wanted to be more useful; you can do it all," she said.

"More useful? Pray what do you mean?" exclaimed the zealous clergyman. "What work

can be nobler, or more important, or more useful than mine? Souls are more important, immeasurably more important, than bodies."

"Ah, but the bodies make people suffer so much more," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

"What is bodily suffering to suffering incurred by sin?" he demanded, solemnly.

"We need not discuss that now," she said, listlessly.

A ring came at the front door. Edith started, so unnerved was she. The loud imperative peal reminded her of the messages that were once as frequent as they were now unfrequent. She caught her breath with a painful sensation of gasping, half rose, and then sat down again.

"I hope that is no one coming to interrupt us," said Hugh.

"Oh no, there is no danger. My callers are very rare."

Eliza entered with a note, the note Fane had written in the small hours that morning.

Edith held it unopened a minute, gazing with abstracted, puzzled eyes at the unfamiliar handwriting, then broke the envelope and read the few lines mechanically, not taking in the sense until she came to the "Austin Fane" at the end. The name was a shock to her, a burning vision

of last evening. A wave of heat, it could hardly be called colour, passed over her wan face. What could he have to say to her? She read the words again slowly and carefully, and as carefully returned the sheet into its envelope. Explain! What could an explanation do? Nothing could undo last night: the deadly shock, the scathing of those unkind eyes, the burning of that hiss, the raw, exposed sensation of her whole mental and moral feelings. This was a wrong amongst those that can never be put right. And however unconsciously, however innocently, Dr. Fane was the first cause of it. He acknowledged as much.

She could not see him. She could not bear to hear that affair spoken about. Any word relating to it would revive the horrible shrinking, would be like a hand laid upon a burn. She had not thought of him at the time, but now a sudden flame of anger and dislike rose in her heart. He had done it all—all—all. He had wrecked her hopes and flung this last shameful humiliation upon her. No, he should not come to see the result of his work. This anger lasted a very brief while; she had no strength for violent emotion. As her brother talked, stray recollections drifted across her mind; the strangely sad and regretful expression of Austin Fane's face the

few times she had seen it, the evident earnestness of his apology about the accident, the action for which he apologised, his eagerness to save her trouble and bring her news next day. He was a gentleman, she knew she would have no cause to regret seeing him, and gradually there came a weak curiosity to hear what he had to say. It was only just to allow him to come and speak in his own defence.

Hugh stayed till the evening, and talked much and earnestly. He impressed upon his sister the necessity for action, the imprudence of lingering in an expensive house, and with an establishment too large for her private means. He offered her a home with him during the time needed for forming further plans. The thing most urgent was to leave Wanningster. "And a rest will do you good," he said, struck again by her thin face and figure.

"You are very kind, Hugh," she said; "I can't promise, though; but I will exert myself as soon as possible to leave this town."

"That is undoubtedly the first thing to be done," he said, encouragingly, as he prepared to leave her. He put his hand on her shoulder and kissed her brow. "Good-bye, my dear sister," he said, with more affection than he had yet shown; "God bless and sustain you."

He was gone.

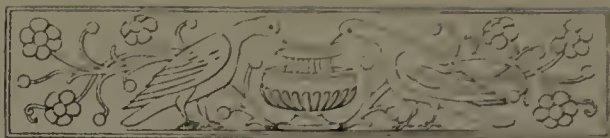
Edith turned again into the room and pressed her hand upon her head. "God bless me?" she repeated to the listening air. "Oh, father, surely He has forsaken me!" After a few minutes she sat down and wrote a note to Fane.

"DEAR DR. FANE,

"I am much obliged for your note. I shall be at home all day to-morrow, and shall be glad to see you any hour it is convenient for you to call.

"EDITH ROMNEY."





CHAPTER V.

FANE EXPLAINS.

“Upon the talk of the poisoning.”—*Hamlet*.

“It was a most infamous affair,” said Dr. Fullagher, speaking with strong indignation the morning after the concert. “Most infamous. I should like to have the handling of that Nieholson. Happily the affair was ill-organised, and few heard the hiss, I feel sure. By-the-by, Fane, what made you take yourself off in that abrupt fashion?”

“I went to knock that fellow down.”

“Did you succeed in your amiable intention?”

“Ask him,” said Fane, smiling grimly.

“Why wasn’t I there?” said the doctor. “For years it has been my desire he should receive a taste of the chastisement he deals his wife with such a liberal hand; it is hard I should not have seen the granting of my wish. Did he howl?” with ghoulish interest.

“He swore, threatened law, that sort of thing. He didn’t show his face in the town-hall again.”

“Drink has not dissolved all his discretion then,” said Fullagher. “I will tell you what you had better do, my friend. Nicholson and his legion assemble nightly at the ‘Queen’s Head’; there they unbend after the toils of the day with beer and pipes, and recreate their powerful intellects in the varied charms of conversation. The sound of a dispute will probably guide you to their haunt. Walk in upon them and give it them roundly for their behaviour. No, try the other tack. Explain the true state of the case to them, and insinuate a broad compliment to their keen intellects and honourable sense of justice. The sentimental and moral tone will bring tears to their eyes, and a mawkish consciousness of unexplored stores of virtue in each breast. A British mob loves to have its feelings worked upon; it is always happy when bathed in tears. If you manage it well, Nicholson may with confidence be left to the tender mercies of his friends. In these affairs a victim is demanded, and I don’t grudge the interesting *rôle* to the greengrocer. Be sure and prepare the way by ordering glasses all round; a generosity in treating them to their favourite tippie is proof positive to their astute

minds that you are a gentleman, and cherish no ulterior designs upon their guileless confidence."

"Thanks. I did think of going and explaining the matter to them. Nothing more public can be done, I fear."

"No," said Dr. Fullagher, with decision. "It is no good making more of it. The hissing was so very uncertain and spasmodic, that I expect but few would catch the sound, or connect it with Miss Romney if they did. If Nicholson is there, I suppose he must have his share of the glasses all round, but I must confess that it goes sorely against the grain to think of his getting a glass for nothing."

"He hasn't got it yet," said Fane, coolly.

"When he sees you I don't suppose the 'subsequent proceedings' will have further interest for him," said the doctor, chuckling.

Fane considered it very improbable. His appearance on the scene would hardly add to the greengrocer's enjoyment of his well-earned relaxation, and Fane was eager to perform the grimly pleasant operation of spoiling his evening. He looked forward to it with cruel relish. There was no hurry about sending his note to Miss Romney, for he wished to be able to tell her—if she permitted him to call—that he had taken every measure possible to prevent Nicholson's

doing harm, and he could not do that till next day.

A rather disagreeable duty made part of his morning's work. The Lorimers were to leave for London, and Mrs. Lorimer had made him understand that it was one of his privileges as engaged man to take a farewell of his betrothed at the station. She claimed the attention, and Fane, not having had presence of mind to plead the necessity of a call upon a country patient at the hour of their departure, could only do what Mrs. Lorimer took for granted was his duty and delight. It seemed unnecessary, as he was to take Sibyl to town the next afternoon, to spend part of Sunday with the Lorimers, and then escort them to Dover on Monday morning. All this had been planned by Mrs. Lorimer in her most amiable manner—was she not inducing him to take a little holiday and an outing, and providing him with every available opportunity for seeing Violet?—and Fane had acquiesced with tame submission. He marvelled at her taste for platform farewells, but lacked energy to cavil. He suggested to Sibyl that she might as well go with him, and that young lady blushed and agreed. The blush was explained by the doctor's angry snort, and "The 'second opinion' is on the move at the same time, I believe?" By the

'second opinion' he of course meant Mr. Lester.

"You are too knowing, doctor dear," said Sibyl serenely.

"Don't dear me," he growled. "I didn't mind before, but there is an artificial ring about it now."

Whereupon Sibyl expressed an amiable willingness to accommodate his taste by changing the *d* to a *b*, for Dr. Fullagher had made himself singularly odious after receiving the news of her engagement. He had accused her of having trifled with his feelings ; and when she had opened her eyes in natural surprise at hearing an allusion to such an unexpected possession on his part, he had severely declared himself to be disappointed in both her and her brother ; that, instead of showing the strong-minded resistance to the tender passion he had been led to confidently expect from them, they had betrayed an imbecile readiness to fall victims to the childish malady. Therefore he rejoiced in her speedy departure, and only hoped her brother would soon discover that the air of Wanningster was not suited to his constitution when shaken by the effects of this same tender passion. ("Tender fiddlestick!" snarled the doctor.) And having uttered these friendly remarks, Fullagher seized his hat and departed, banging the door after him.

In spite of his disapproval, however, they went to the station.

Sibyl saw her lover, and looked doubly charming with blushes and smiles. It pleased her to threaten to postpone her return. "I quite dread to-morrow," she said, pouting. "Aunt Fane will receive me *now* with all the honours of the repentant prodigal."

And Fane did his part manfully, making up for lack of sentiment by the novels and papers he bought for Violet's delectation on the journey. Mrs. Lorimer found it necessary to playfully remind him that the length of rail between Wanningster and London was in reality something less than interminable, although she could quite understand it might appear otherwise to him and Violet. Fane drew a long breath and straightened himself as the train left the platform, carrying with it Mrs. Lorimer's smile, and the whole collection of irksome fetters and duties represented and suggested by that smile. After Monday he would be practically free for some weeks at least; those weeks would give him time to prepare for, and to face the future lying before him. He felt in horrible need of breathing time, but he was in no humour for taking it yet; he was pursued by a fierce, engrossing excitement—he could think of nothing but Edith's reply to his

note and his possible interview with her. Beyond that he saw nothing.

In the evening he paid his visit to the Queen's Head. The room was well filled. Several faces he recognised as having seen near Nicholson the night before, and he congratulated himself on the possession of a good opportunity for his explanation.

His entrance created a perceptible sensation, for Nicholson had not kept silence on the subject of the indignity he had received in the entry. He had convened what might be called an indignation meeting, and had hardly got through the relation of his wrongs, with its running and ornamental commentary, before the tall figure of his chastiser darkened the door. An overpowering impulse to "cut and run" robbed him of his usual presence of mind—unfortunately, the doctor was too near the door for escape to be unnoticed. Then Faue, who had some knowledge of the way in which to deal with an audience like the one before him, cleared his brow and looked round pleasantly and frankly at the men. He told them he had something to say to them. and that, as listening was dry work as well as talking, he would order a glass of each man's favourite mixture, so that they might be comfortable while he said his say.

This announcement was received by non-committal grunts. The stolid neutrality on each guarded countenance did not relax in the least, except in the cases of Mr. Tuggles and Mr. Nicholson, who looked uneasily suspicious. One or two, with an unconscious—what might be termed a disconnected air, uttered the name of their “tipple”—but not as if they expected their obliging information to be acted upon.

Fane gave his order, adding with a laugh, “I suppose the landlord knows each man’s taste by heart.”

“If he don’t it ain’t for want of learnin’ it,” observed Mr. Bond, the tailor.

“No, no ; we says the lesson to him times enough,” added another man, thawed into mirth by the approaching glass he was not to pay for.

“He’s a —— fool if he can’t remember,” said Tuggles, surlily.

The tray of steaming glasses was brought, and no man refused to humour the doctor’s whim ; the fingers even of the most suspecting closed as it were involuntarily round the comforting circles, the owners probably justifying their acceptance by regarding the contents of their glasses as medical prescriptions, which must be disposed of to avert mysterious consequences.

Nor was Nicholson passed over, for Fane had not troubled to mention his name; and, like a man of honour, he graciously made no objection to touching the olive-branch extended in this novel form. His mind was growing easier. The doctor had advanced to the hearth by this time—the door was unguarded. It is true, his retreat might be intercepted in one stride by the doctor; and Nicholson cursed the fate which caused his notions of comfort to insist upon the warm side of the room furthest from the door. Still he saw a possibility of escape. By assuming a jaunty air, he would throw the doctor off his guard, and then, when those keen eyes did not happen to be in every corner of the room at once, and especially in *his*, the deed should be done.

“I have an explanation to make,” said Fane in vigorous, distinct accents. “I want to speak about what happened last evening in the town-hall.”

Nicholson gulped down his glass of spirit, and courageously shuffled across the floor. But there was an unexpected lion in the way. Mr. Bond sat close by, and he laid his hand on the latch, and nodded with great friendliness to the green-grocer.

“Don’t hurry,” said he. “Shop’s shut up now surely, and you’re just as much interested in the doctor’s talk as us.”

Nicholson uttered a wild oath.

"That's right—keep the door," exclaimed Fane. "I want you all to hear me."

Tuggles, having also drained his glass, showed his lack of interest in the further proceedings by blustering to the door. "I've nothink to do with it," he muttered. "Let go, Bond."

"You was in it too, Tuggles," replied Bond. "We're all in the same boat."

Tuggles turned white and swore. "Let me go, I say. I'd nothing to do with the —— affair."

"Mr. Tuggles," said Fane, pleasantly, "pray stay and give us your help! I want to talk it over fairly with you all—I am not going to do any more knocking down!"

Mr. Tuggles looked courageous at once.

"I simply want to show you that there has been a mistake. I want to explain exactly how it was caused, and beg you all, everyone of you, to let it go no further. Landlord, fill Mr. Tuggles's glass."

"Mistake?" growled Tuggles, sinking back on his seat, and pushing his glass towards the landlord. There was a virtuous indignation on his brow as he looked fiercely around. "Then I've been took in, and by —— but I'll make the person pay as did it! I'll not be made to do things

through no mistakes!" His fiery eye fixed the quailing Nicholson.

"Fullagher was right," thought Fane, with unholy satisfaction. "Lynch law for ever!"

He then proceeded with his explanation, and so frankly and good-humouredly that they believed every word he said—"of course, him bein' a doctor, he knew what was poison and what wasn't."

On the whole, Fane was satisfied that he had at length succeeded in giving the death-blow to that report; and he was more than satisfied with the prospect of Nicholson's enjoyment of life for the next few days.





CHAPTER VI.

EDITH SPEAKS.

· · · “with heart resign’d
To its surpassing sorrow.”—OWEN MEREDITH.

EDITH’S note reached him by the morning post. He tore it open with trembling fingers, and a degree of agitation which showed how keen had been his suspense. When he had read her permission to call, he pressed his lips with a passionate gratitude and reverence upon her name. “Anyone else would have returned my note unopened.”

He ordered his brougham half-an-hour earlier, and drove first to Princess Road ;—to his thinking hers was a more urgent case than any on his list. He was taken to the drawing-room, and Edith came to him directly.

“Thank you for coming so soon,” she said, offering her hand.

“I could not wait,” said Fane impulsively, as he clasped it. “I would have come yesterday,

but I felt that I must ask for your permission first. After Thursday evening, my calling upon you seemed an unpardonable intrusion. It is so hopelessly inadequate to say how deeply grieved I am about that unfortunate occurrence—words are so weak—but, Miss Romney, believe me—I never felt so sorry and so unhappy before.”

She bent her head in acknowledgment, and turned away to seat herself, after motioning him to a chair. “You will spare me as much as you can, I know,” she said, in a weak, hurried voice.

Fane had told himself how painful this interview would be to her, and he had believed he understood what he said; but seeing her, and hearing those few faltering words, made him realise something of the full force of that painfulness. His duty was to get through his task as quickly as possible, and to take himself out of her sight—any expression or appearance of sympathy would gall her—he had imagined so, but to see the reality of that imagination was an exquisite pang.

She was sitting with her back to the light, and her downcast eyes bent on her dress. When she first came in and stood facing the window, it had struck him there was a change in her looks, even since Thursday.

“I will do my best,” he said, in a low,

agitated voice. And then he moved his eyes from her and fixed them on the fire.

“Of course you must have heard the absurd rumour that was set afloat some few weeks ago by Nicholson the greengrocer?”

“Yes,” said Edith. “I connected what happened the evening before with that report. I suppose I was right?”

“Quite right. Nicholson was the moving spirit in the affair. It appears he entertains some malicious grudge against you in his drunken mind—because you remonstrated with him for ill-treating his wife.”

“I gathered from what he said the last time I called that he bore me a grudge for that.”

“Good heavens!” thought Fane, with a shudder, as in quick fancy he saw a probable scene for that occasion, “what she has suffered!”

“But some gesture of mine is really at the bottom of the mischief,” he went on, hastily. “I feel as if I had been pitifully childish. Nicholson himself handed me the bottle of medicine prescribed by you, and I took it and threw it out as if it was poison, so he says. I have a faint remembrance of some disgust; but it was caused by the man himself, and the fact that he had touched the bottle, by nothing else. I have some fads about medicine—there may have

been in that mixture a certain drug I would not have considered necessary to prescribe, and that would be enough to cause me to discontinue it ; my doing so in such a summary fashion must be simply set down to the affectation of magnifying my own opinion at the expense of my fellow-practitioners—a very common and a very childish affectation. I have never dreamed for a moment of such a suspicion regarding you. Nicholson has twisted my inadvertence to suit his own wickedness. He has done his best to make others believe what he pretended to believe, and he incited the unwarrantable affair at the concert. I told him my mind on the subject two or three weeks ago, when the report first reached me. I reprimanded him pretty sharply then, and I believed the lie had died down, but to such a wretch the wish for revenge is as strong a craving as his wish for drink. He has had a second and a severer lesson, and I think—I am almost sure he will not dare to repeat his lie. Neither will his associates. I visited them in their public-house last evening, and explained the matter to them. They understood at once ; they are not malicious ; and it is some gratification to think that Nicholson will be called upon to suffer at their hands. for the working man has an objection to being made a fool of."

He paused in his rapid, impetuous speech. He had kept his eyes steadily averted from her face in keen realisation of the pain of these allusions to her, only glancing sideways from under their lowered lids he could see one of her hands lying upon the side of her dress, and he noticed, even in his agitation, the tightness of its closed grasp, the white of the thin straining fingers against the blackness of the material.

"Thank you," said Edith, in slow, distinct tones. "I am grateful to you for taking so much trouble. I am glad you have told me. I quite understand."

Fane moved quickly, and turned his wretched, handsome face from the fire to her. "Don't thank me!" he exclaimed, in a smothered fashion.

"I have done nothing, except harm. It is like a mockery telling you all this; a locking of the stable door after the theft. I can't *undo* what has been done!"

"Ah, you feel that!" she exclaimed, in a half-undertone, and involuntarily.

"Feel it?" he said, with biting emphasis. "It is terrible. If I could do anything," he added, looking at her appealingly. "If I could do *anything*—but it is presumptuous of me even to speak of my regret."

"No," said Elith, with a quick gesture, and looking across at him with a bright, unearthly smile, "don't say that. Let me thank you; it is much, very much, to know someone understands."

She rose restlessly from her seat. Fane got up too, and stood watching her. She moved a step or two, as if in a confused, feverish dream; her eyes shone brilliantly, a bright colour had risen to either wan cheek.

"There is something I should like to say," she said, resting her hands heavily on the back of a chair standing near. "And yet I hardly know how to say it. Only I must try, for it may do good for someone else. Dr. Fane," she turned her shining eyes upon him, "perhaps in the course of your life you may meet other women who are doctors, and I wish to speak a good word for them beforehand. I have had my trial, and I have failed. But it seems hard that the others should suffer as I have suffered. Let *them* have a fair chance, as far as it lies in your power—you may be able to help them, who knows? You give new men a fair chance—you can be generous to a young man starting in life. Success is hard enough to be gained by him, but he is allowed free and full use of his powers. Hard work and patience bring their rewards to

him. His advantages are not made useless by conventionality ; he is not fettered by prejudice ; he is not crippled by constant disapproval and censure. You let him stand or fall, as circumstances and his own abilities allow. He is not condemned unheard. Even if he makes mistakes, he can retrieve them, and they will in time be forgotten. But I—I have not had a fair chance,” she said, almost wildly. “Harder burdens than a professional man has to bear were put upon me. I was not even judged by my work. I was not allowed so much justice. My crime is my womanhood, and I have been sentenced for it alone. Think for a moment—think what it has all meant. Think that I, a woman, with all a woman’s delicacy, should have been branded as unwomanly. Think what it is to be scorned and derided. What do you all believe we are made of ? have we not hearts, and longings, and dignity, and pride ? and are these not as precious and true to us as yours to you ? We must live our separate lives, and have all our powers and aims to be useless, despised, and jeered at because not admired by one particular man ? My profession to me has been what his life’s work is to a man, and yet men, and women too, can turn against me and stone me with their hardness, their contempt, their cruel, cruel

sneers. And," she went on, still agitatedly, "there are, and will be, other women to whom their chosen work is the same. Only those who are thoroughly in earnest can take up the profession on the hard terms made with women. Oh, it is hard!—as hard as injustice always is! What right have men and old-fashioned prejudice to dictate to us the limits of what we may do? Give us free room to choose!—are not a woman's instincts of propriety as trustworthy as a man's?—and then let the world judge our work on its own merits alone. It will soon be proved what we can, and what we can not do. The phrase is that women are not strong enough to do the work they are asking for; but how many men could be found strong enough to stand up against the accumulation of difficulties put in our way? You require us to be stronger than men, harder, and infinitely more courageous; a double strain is put upon each one of our faculties. Not only must our first step be taken in defiance of society's prejudices, but all we do is done under the crushing sense of distrust and disapproval. You make the battle of life only a hopeless struggle for us: because we are weaker—and I have felt lately how terribly some poor women must suffer from weakness—we are to be treated mercilessly. From the nursery, our

advantages are one-sided ; and because, as things are, it is impossible for us to compete with men, that inability is laughed at as another proof of our inferiority. What can we do but fail ? ” .

“ Miss Romney,” said Fane, in a broken voice, “ I would give my life to undo your failure here ! ”

“ Your life ? ” she repeated, confusedly, and then put her hand to her head, and said with a wail, “ Ah, but I have lost mine—all that made it life to me ! ”

There was a breathless pause. What could he do or say ? What he would have liked to do was to fall on his knees before her and beg for forgiveness. There was something strange in Edith's manner and words ; an unnaturalness he was quick to divine, little as he had seen of her. It seemed to him as though the pressure of her unhappiness had passed the limit of her endurance, and goaded her to complaint. Yet, why should she utter it in this way ?—the way of one whose own interest in the question is over ? There was a chill suggestion in this commending of her medical sisters to his forbearance. What was he to say ? To propose a second attempt, a second braving of all these trials, was too palpably commonplace, even heartless. He

recognised her interpretation of this defeat here in Wanningster as final—as a conclusive negative set to any further attempt. And, for his own part, he believed that, as things were, only failure was possible for a woman in his profession. There were a few exceptional cases, but to his mind too exceptional to give encouragement. And the battle was so hard! the risks were so fearful! How was one bruised and battered as she was to be recommended to fight on?

Edith glanced at him more calmly.

"It is strange I should complain to you, is it not?" she said, in a half-bewildered way.

He winced. "I deserve all the reproaches you can give me," he said with a trembling lip.

"Don't misunderstand me. I have no wish to reproach you. You could not help it. You only think as the world thinks. Custom was too strong for me," she said, slowly, with weary pauses between.

He was unable to deny her words.

"You are worn out—you are ill," he said, abruptly. "It is barbarous to keep you talking. I will go." He took up his hat and moved a step towards her, and paused, loth to leave her. not liking to offer his hand.

"I am tired—yes. I want sleep. I did not sleep last night," she said.

"Nor the night before," added Fane grimly to himself. "I hope you will rest now," he said aloud. "Good morning."

"Thank you again for what you have told me; I quite understand it. Good-bye; perhaps I shall not see you again," she added, as he started at the word. "I must leave Wanningster shortly."

"Is the time of your departure settled?" unconsciously holding her hand, and gazing at her with miserable eyes.

"Not yet. But I shall go as soon as I can. It is impossible to stay here."

"Yes." He could not utter the word good-bye, however. He wrung her hand, and gave a long look into her eyes, believing he was taking a last farewell. At the door he turned, and saw her standing there, her face in profile against the light behind—she had forgotten him already; and with a lingering glance he went away, haunted by the thought—"I shall never see her again."

Fane escorted Sibyl to London that afternoon, and carried out the plans arranged by Mrs. Lorimer with a docility that might have been

amiable, had it not been so completely heartsick. Mrs. Lorimer took leave of him quite affectionately ; her heart was touched to see his dejection at the parting. She promised to send him the very earliest news of her sister's state, knowing how great would be his suspense until he heard ; she assured him she felt for him, suspense was so dreadful. Fane agreed that it was, finding some difficulty in understanding that the suspense referred to was the uncertainty of his marriage day. Compunction made him part very tenderly from Violet. He called himself a wretched traitor as he pressed the last kiss on her pale face. But she need never know !

He reached home about nine o'clock on Monday evening, and, finding no urgent messages awaiting him, called next door. To his surprise, Dr. Fullagher was not at home.

"A message came from Miss Jacques of The Cottage to you, sir," said Samuel, "and was brought on to us as you was away, and master took the case for you, as it was urgent. I expect him back every minute now, sir. You'll come in and wait ?"

Fane decided to do so, and went into the dining-room. The table was laid for dinner with its usual daintiness. The invaluable Samuel always contrived to have his silver and glass at

the highest polish, and some show of flowers or ferns. The case must be urgent indeed to make Dr. Fullagher postpone his dinner. Fane could not understand it. Had Miss Jacques proved faithless to her friendship, he bitterly thought. And then a new idea startled him—Miss Romney might have suddenly left Wanningster.

About ten minutes after the doctor returned, Fane went out and met him in the hall.

“Ah, Fane, you’ve got back,” he remarked, quietly.

“Where have you been?” asked Fane, helping him off with his great-coat.

“Miss Jacques sent an imperative message for one of us to go and see her friend, Miss Romney. You were out, and I went.”

“What is it?” asked Fane, hoarsely.

“Brain-fever.”

“Go on; tell me more. Is it a bad case?”

“I fear so, Fane.”

“But what do you think of her chances? Is there any hope of her pulling through?”

“I am not a prophet. How can I answer your question at this early stage?”

The doctor marched into the dining-room, and rang the bell loudly for dinner.

Fane stayed, and made a pretence of sharing the meal. It was at best only a pretence on Dr.

Fullagher's part, causing Samuel to remark to David, as that functionary regarded the uneaten dishes with disgust, "Doctoring don't agree with master now, that's certain. There's something wrong; they're both as mum as ghosts."

"She will have good nursing," remarked the doctor, when the table was cleared. "Miss Jacques is in her element. Lord! she's as fond of her as if she were her own child; and there's a jewel of a servant there, who evidently worships the poor thing. Happily, she has plenty of self-control, and is amenable to reason, so the affection won't get in the way of her sense."

"Her name is Sarah," he added, after a pause of some minutes, during which his companion had stared vacantly before him. "And she has the house in beautiful condition." Dr. Fullagher had a quick eye for the beauties of a well-kept house. "I don't think I need call again to-night, but I shall go first thing to-morrow."

"You? do you mean to keep the case then?"

"Well—yes. But I've no objection to your going as a partner."

"She ought to be seen again to-night," said Fane, half-rising.

"Nonsense, nonsense. What's the good of frightening the nurses? I have a cigar man, and tell me how Miss Sibyl is, and what you've done."

They talked a while about Fane's fleeting visit to London, but he could bring no interest to the conversation. His thoughts were in the sick-room at No. 20. He chafed against the hours of inaction that must elapse before the morning's visit. They appeared insupportable. He wanted to see her now—at once; to assure himself that the best was being done for her. And why should he not? His training was more advanced than his friend's, of necessity the doctor's was old-fashioned. He might be able to suggest something. He threw his cigar into the fire and rose abruptly.

"It's no use, doctor. I shall go to-night. I must see for myself."

For a wonder Dr. Fullagher took no offence.

"Go, wretched sceptic," said he. "But hark ye, friend, you take exception to my treatment at your peril."





CHAPTER VII.

ANXIETY.

“She will die.”

FANE walked his fastest to Princess Road. He was kept waiting some minutes in the dining-room, and then Miss Jacques came in.

The old lady had installed herself as head nurse. Feeling uneasy at Edith's keeping away from The Cottage for four or five days,—an unusually long interval between her friend's calls,—she had driven into town that afternoon, and found Sarah in a state of great distress and alarm. Her young mistress had tried to rise that morning, and been unable to do so; she had owned to feeling ill,—“and she must be bad if she'll own to it,” quoth Sarah, tearfully,—and had forbidden a doctor to be sent for.

“I am not surprised at that,” said Miss Jacques, sternly. “Show me her room, Sarah.”

It was a shock to find that Edith did not know her.

“Edith!” cried Miss Jacques, in alarm.

“There is no one to call me Edith now, father; you have all left me,” was the wild answer.

Sarah, who had tiptoed into the room after Miss Jacques, burst into tears.

Miss Jacques beckoned her to the door.

“Stay here, Sarah, while I write a note to Dr. Fane. Was she light-headed when you were in the room before?”

“No, ma’am, nothing like this. She seemed a bit strange, but there’s a terrible difference. I wished I’d come in sooner, but she told me to leave her to rest. What is it, ma’am?”

“I’m afraid—brain-fever. I’ve seen it before.”

Sarah threw up her hands. “I knew it! I knew she’d die! It wasn’t for nothing I heard three knocks at my room wall three weeks last Sunday.”

“Stuff and rubbish about three knocks! Who talks about dying? What you have to do, my good creature, is to believe she’ll get better, and to nurse her as if you meant she should. Just listen to me. I’m her friend, and I mean to stay and help you. I’ve seen a great deal of illness, and I know you are too sensible to object to my having a share in the nursing.”

“I know *you’ve* always stuck by her, ma’am,

and I've no right to say you shan't do all you can for her ; but I say this, not the queen herself should take *my* part in nursing her from me. So there." Sarah closed her lips firmly.

"You are quite right, no one can do for her as you can ; but there will be enough for both of us if it is brain-fever. Now I will send a note."

Miss Jacques bowed stiffly and slightly, and looked at Fane with a severe blankness of expression.

He explained his absence, and said he thought it necessary her patient should be seen again that night.

"I am obliged to you for taking so much trouble," was the dubious reply.

It struck him coldly. Suppose this hostile old lady should refuse to put the case into his hands ?

"You sent for me in the first instance, I believe ?" he said, with a touch of haughtiness.

Miss Jacques gave him one of her shrewd, sharp glances. She repressed the retort which rose to her lips.

"I shall be glad for you to see her, Dr. Fane," she said. "You don't suppose I would prevent her having one advantage or chance ? In times of serious illness one feels as if the doctor could not call too often."

She walked to the door. Fane drew a breath of relief—so deep and heartfelt that he knew how sharp had been the momentary suspense—and followed.

Edith's room was behind the drawing-room. One wax candle burned on a table, its light carefully shaded from the bed. He heard her voice even as he entered the room, and started, then recognised how unlike it was to hers. Sarah sat by the pillow, as close as she could get, an image of rigid misery, her eyes following every movement of the sufferer, her lips involuntarily framing soothing remarks in answer to the wild, feverish utterances.

Fane walked straight to the bed; coming from the lighted stairs and passage, he could not see quite distinctly.

"Just bring the light," he said, and Sarah obeyed.

As it fell on her face, Edith started, and flung herself to the other side of the bed, shuddering, and hiding her eyes. "Their eyes scorch me," she cried.

"There, that will do," said Fane, sharply. And Sarah made haste to put the candle in its former place. Fane laid his fingers on the patient's wrist; they were shaken off, and although he knew the action was unconscious,

it drove the blood from his cheek, and staggered him. He stood by a few moments, doing nothing. Then he recollected himself, and made a second attempt to feel her pulse. This time she started up, wrenched her hand away, and looked at him wildly. For one breathless moment all thought she recognised him; fear dilated her burning eyes, and then came a piercing scream.

"*Father!* you will not let them *touch* me!"

"Oh, my darling! what has vexed you?" exclaimed Miss Jacques, forgetting this was delirium, so real was the terror in the cry.

Fane abruptly turned, and walked to the table. It was some moments before he could control himself enough to come back.

"Don't trouble her," said Miss Jacques, hastily.

He glanced across the bed at her. Their eyes met. His were questioning, hers were wrathful, to bitterness.

He asked some questions,—most careful they were,—and received answers which surprised him a little. The old doctor's directions were so thorough. Fane had not given him credit for such detailed treatment. Nothing was left for him to suggest.

Miss Jacques followed him on to the landing.

“ Well ? ” she said.

“ Well ? ” he repeated, not understanding.

“ I mean, what is your opinion, of course ? ”

• He averted his eyes. It was not easy to assume a professional nullity of expression, for she had taken him unawares ; he was not prepared with a cheering formula.

“ Don’t be afraid to tell me the truth,” said Miss Jacques, compressing her lips.

“ There is nothing to tell at this early stage.”

“ You doctors are all alike ; there is no such thing as a satisfactory answer to be got out of you.” She spoke almost vehemently ; she had read his answer in his face. “ He believes the worst,” she thought, as she turned away, in all the irritability of grief.

Fane left the house, and walked on aimlessly away from the town. Professional habit had forbidden the expression of his honest opinion—if an instinctive conviction can be termed an opinion. Her illness was the reality of a confused, indefinite presentiment. As soon as he heard she was ill, he felt that he had expected it ; that the calamity had fallen which must inevitably fall. Miss Jacques’s request for his opinion surprised him dully. What opinion could there be but one ? Uncertainty as to the

result of the illness did not even occur to him. She was dangerously ill ; she would die. The old Greek story, from which Dr. Fullagher had so constantly drawn his parallel, ran in his head, perhaps influenced this despondency. The greater part had been repeated ; it seemed as if the rest must follow.

He was called out that night, and returned home between nine and ten next morning. Dr. Fullagher had already set out for his visit to Miss Romney, and had left a message to say that he would wait for his friend at her house. Fane ordered the carriage, drank a cup of coffee, and started to follow in less than twenty minutes.

He was again kept waiting in the dining-room. The house seemed deadly still. The room presented a picture of desolate want of occupancy and of desertion in its painful order and chill atmosphere, the fire newly lit and struggling for existence. A fine large black cat came into the room in a roaming, forsaken sort of way ; and, after inspecting the stranger and rubbing against him, sat down at his feet where he stood in the window, curled its tail about it, and, looking up at him, opened its mouth for one dejected mew. The forlorn aspect of the animal added to the dreary effect ;

it was evidently mystified by the present state of things, and the unusual want of attention and notice. The cat was Sarah's pet; but Fane did not know that, and he regarded it kindly, as Edith's favourite.

He began to grow impatient. Why was he not sent for up-stairs? Just then slow and heavy steps descended the stairs, and the next moment Dr. Fullagher entered the room, carrying in his hands a soft, dark pile. Fane was coming quickly from the window to ask—"How is she?" when his eye fell on the burden. The words were checked on his lips, and his steps were arrested. The doctor laid the hair with reverential care upon the table.

"I was obliged to do it," he said, with apologetic deprecation in his tone. His rugged, florid face was subdued by an expression of grave pity, as he stood dreamily and absently fingering the dark silken tresses, lifting them gently one after another, and letting them sink again in shining duskiness.

Every touch was on Fane's nerves. He could not withdraw his eyes. At last he could bear it no longer. "Don't," he said, in a strange, harsh voice; "you have no right to touch—"

Dr. Fullagher started, drew back his hand, and shot a quick glance at the other's face.

"I beg her pardon," he said, gently. He paused a moment, and then stole out of the room.

Fane sank into a chair; and bending forward, with elbows on his knees, and face dropped between his palms, sat gazing at that mournful little heap lying there in such pathetic dependence, as it were, upon his protection. Presently he got up, and slowly approached the table, drawing nearer, step by step, to the place on which his eyes were fixed. He hung over the hair in rigid misery, conscious of no distinct thoughts, only oppressed by the bewilderment of a great and intolerable anguish.

Hasty steps along the passage roused him, and he went back to his former station near the window.

Miss Jacques came in hurriedly to look for something. On her way to the sideboard she caught sight of Edith's hair; a quick quiver passed over her carefully set features. It disappeared in a moment. She cast a sharp, suspicious glance at the tall motionless figure in the window, and muttering, "No need to leave it in the dust," began rummaging in one of the drawers. With a piece of new tissue paper she came to the table. As tenderly as the old doctor, but with a more business-like rapidity,

she handled the long locks. In both hands she raised them, and put them on the paper; the paper rustled as she laid the two sides together, when a hand came on hers, and arrested the busy fingers.

Miss Jacques started as Dr. Fullagher had done, and stopped her operations to see Fane close beside her, a passionate struggle of grief and misery in his expression and clouding his deep-set eyes. The old lady compressed her lips, and looked steadily up at him.

"May I not—will you not give me a lock?" he stammered hoarsely, unconscious of the unrelenting gaze.

"Pray why should I?"

His hand fell from hers, and he did look at her then.

"Yes," said Miss Jacques, "why should I? Can you put forward any reasonable claim? Or are hair-collections the newest fashion? If so, *you* will have no difficulty in getting a fine one—at least, fine in the way of variety. Perhaps you are artistic, and fancy dark hair will contrast well with auburn."

He drew back a step. Miss Jacques was quite aware of her cruelty; she knew she was very cruel, for there was no mistaking the suffering of this man; she felt even a terrible

sort of excitement and satisfaction in the exercise of this only piece of cruelty in her life. Grief and anger were at war within her, and she was grimly glad for the moment that she could take some revenge for her dear friend upon the worker of all this desolation.

“Would you have asked *her*?” she demanded, in clear, low, vibrating tones of agitation. “Could you have gone to her, with all those careless wrongs you have done her fresh upon you, and thought that all was atoned, all was made up for by your pitiful, man’s admiration?—the sneering speeches, the chivalrous contempt, the ignoble antagonism—all, yes, all—with all the harm they have wrought, receive ample atonement, I suppose, because you, a man, are pleased to perceive the beauty and grace God has so richly given her. Do you suppose, when all must recognise her goodness, that one man’s approbation—an approbation generally given with the generous flattery of a first discoverer—do you suppose that that can heal her broken heart, and supply the place of all her dreams, and ambitions, and aspirations? No, no,” said Miss Jacques, impatiently, “there are some sweet souls dependent on such slight elements,—Miss Lorimer, for instance,—but she—my darling—is one of those who can only be satisfied by God.” Her voice

faltered, and her worn, thin fingers tremblingly tried to begin folding the paper. "You men have yet to learn that you cannot supply all women's needs." Again she paused, and then said, in her first resolute manner, "But I have no power to grant your boon, Dr. Fane. This hair is hers—*hers*," rather fiercely, "and no one has a right to give one thread of it away."

She hastily fastened up the pareel, and carried it out of the room. Five minutes after she was back again, and going up to Fane, who sat with face hidden on his arms, touched his shoulder. He raised a haggard countenance.

"Forgive me, Dr. Fane," she said, more gently. "I had no idea there was so much of the tiger in me. We ought to be fasting and praying instead of indulging our evil tempers when the hand of God lies so heavily upon us. 'Be still, and know that I am God'—ah, why can we not be still? why must we tear and sting each other in the dust? I ask your pardon for my own sake, but I—I cannot think very kindly of you yet. Unreasonable as it is to blame you, I cannot help feeling very bitter as yet. I know the whole unreasonableness of it—every man for himself—the golden law of worldly life is as just as law can make it, and I have no cause to complain. I am even beginning to be

sorry for you. But I can't do what you asked. No one has a right to dispose of another's hair when—when she is living.”

And Miss Jacques hurriedly departed.

Fane did not see Edith on that occasion. He let himself out as soon as Miss Jacques left him this second time, and drove away on his morning's round.

If good nursing could ensure recovery, Edith's chance was the best a sufferer ever had. She was nursed devotedly and skilfully. Dr. Fullagher spent the time unclaimed by his birds in Princess Road. He would not permit Miss Jacques, or Winifred, who had received early tidings of her aunt's illness, and had come home at once—he would not permit either to sit up. He and Sarah managed the night-watches between them. The doctor took excellent care to explain his attention to the case. After an allusion to the war-horse, intended to convey sympathetic similarity, he observed that it was the only case he had, and he was determined to get as much occupation out of it as possible. He affected to remember that this had been his ordinary method of doctoring; he searched the shadowy recesses of his mind, and instanced occasions of past night-watches, omitting the length of intervals between as an unnecessary matter of mere

detail. Miss Jacques shook her head with a tremulous smile of scepticism. "I shall never cease to be grateful to you, doctor," she persisted.

Fullagher fumed, and almost turned his back.

"Women *never* understand," he said, sullenly.

After the first day Edith, in her delirium, went back to her childhood's memories; rambled about her mother and sister, the old childish games and little troubles, and alluded constantly to her father. The references to the last few months were comparatively few. The days passed, weighted by fear, made active by constant ministrations, until an evening came when the sufferer slept a long sleep. They were all in her room. A deep silence reigned, too death-like in contrast with the hours rung by that suffering voice; more than one felt a chill of terror as they waited. Hugh had been summoned, and sat apart in self-contained unhappiness. Miss Jacques was calming herself with prayer. Winifred was close beside the pillow, her eyes fixed on the sleeping face. Sarah sat at the foot of the bed, her hands folded before her, and with the rigid sternness of expression which had never relaxed since the first day of her mistress's illness.

"Is this what they call a crisis?" she had whispered hoarsely to Dr. Fullagher.

"Not exactly," he answered. "But, if all goes well, we may hope for some improvement after."

The old doctor's tone was anything but hopeful. He was on the opposite side to Winifred, watching every change of his patient's face, with fingers on her wrist.

Fane's noiseless entrance attracted no attention, except a glance of dull curiosity from Hugh. The others were used to his comings and goings, and were at present wholly absorbed in the labouring life they watched. Fane took all in as he entered—the complete silence, the breathless watching, the engrossing suspense. He stopped short, cast a quick glance round, and then came and stood by the bed near Winifred. The old doctor would not raise his eyes, and meet the pair fixed upon him with a sort of fascination of despair. Fane slowly lowered them until they rested on Edith. For a full minute he stood looking down at the face upon the pillow; he did not feel her pulse—his medical knowledge, or rather all consciousness of it, had slipped from him like a useless garment for the time being. He gazed at her as helplessly, as ignorantly as Winifred herself. She would die; the conviction had haunted him since the beginning of her illness, and even this sleep,

which might, as the doctor had said, prove favourable, carried no suggestion of hope to him. His look was the look a man takes who knows he is taking his last. At length he turned and stole gently from the room.

He descended the stairs to the deserted regions below, took his hat, and noiselessly opened and shut the front door. The night was dark. The sky was far-off, intense, profound almost to blackness. He went to the gate and leaned over. The lamps at gradually lessening intervals showed the line of road, but gave only points of brightness to heighten, not relieve, the gloom of the night. Towards the left, where London Road crossed at right angles, there was a faint and occasional murmur of life and movement. The rest was silence.

He was conscious of no surroundings. The influence only of that darkened chamber clung about him, and seemed real. She was dying—dying then, and he had come out because he could not wait the shock of that moment when it would be said, “It is over.” She was dying—and he loved her with all his heart and soul. Dying—in defeat and unhappiness; disallowed the quieting of submission, the recompense of kindness. Dying—the very atmosphere of death surrounded him and filled the night.

Although he had accepted her doom with a crushed conviction from the first, there had been bitter moments of defiance during the days of her illness, when he had rebelled with all the strength of his love and grief against the decree; but what rebellion, what defiance, was in him now, as he stood alone under the dark night sky, bowed and crushed by anguish? He could only think of her—dying.

No passer-by disturbed him. He had the cold black night all to himself. Once he moved, turned round, and looked up at the house. It was dark, except for the light which struggled dimly through the blinds of the dining-room. His lips trembled. "God!—*God!*" broke from them in a sort of muttered recognition and appeal. As he turned away his eyes they were caught by a faint gleam at the side of the path. He stooped to look, and found some little clumps of snowdrops. He gathered one, and shut it between two leaves of his pocket-book. Then he went back to his former position, leaning over the gate; and an hour passed. The deep, solemn tones of St. Matthew's striking twelve, every stroke borne distinctly on the still air, were unheard by him. They had hardly died away, when the faint click of the front door vibrated painfully through every nerve. He did not move. The

door was cautiously opened, and closed as cautiously, and the slow turning of the key inside might be heard. Heavy steps came down the path.

"We can go home now," said Dr. Fullagher, in grave, hushed tones.

Fane raised himself, and fumbled to undo the gate. He was stiff and numb with the constrained attitude and the cold, and his fingers bungled at the simple task.

The old doctor lifted his hat with a weary sigh. "I shall sleep well to-night," he observed. "I never felt more thankful in my life. Lord! doctoring's no joke when you're interested in the case."

His friend faced him sharply. "Fullagher! what do you mean?"

The doctor could not see his expression, but the tone was enough.

"Good God, Fane, don't you understand she's better? If I had known—she woke up ten minutes ago," he said, rapidly, "and knew them. I kept out of the way. She was conscious for about five minutes. There is a marked improvement. I hope now—for the first time. I had a nasty superstitious feeling before, I must confess; besides, I was afraid of a complication during that long sleep. She dozed off again—I left them happy, crying. Why—Fane! Good God, Fane!"



CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER.

THE doctor enjoyed a good night's rest, and paid his one professional call as early as usual next morning. Fane, who had a heavy round, and did not return till nearly three in the afternoon, went in next door at once, expecting to find his friend, and to obtain the latest news of the patient they were both so deeply interested in. Some feeling of constraint, approaching almost to shyness, had prevented him from calling when he passed Princess Road that morning. To his surprise, and still more to his alarm, he learnt from Samuel that Dr. Fullagher had gone out again after lunch. Could the much rejoiced over improvement have been merely transitory? His fears sprang up as strong as ever. He set out straightway for Miss Romney's, unable to wait for the doctor's return. Eliza, however, smiled as she admitted

him, and softly informed him that Miss Romney was better. Dr. Fullagher was in her room, and Fane said he would go up to him.

The house was as still as on the night before, and it was a curious experience to steal noiselessly up the stairs which he had descended only a few hours ago in such broken-hearted sorrow and despair. Edith's door was slightly open; he paused to listen, but heard no sound, and pushed it far enough to enable him to pass.

The movement brought the doctor on tiptoe to the door. "I thought I heard you," he whispered.

"How is she?" asked Fane, also in a whisper.

"Asleep just now—very weak. I'm in charge. I sent Miss Jacques to lie down, and Miss Noel to get some fresh air."

"Could I not relieve you for a while?" asked Fane, hesitatingly.

The doctor stroked his beard dubiously. Then he cast a glance at his friend's eager anxious face and gave in. "She's asleep, and won't know," he argued to himself. "And the others are safely out of the way. Poor devil! perhaps it *will* be a satisfaction. The

request is modest, anyway, and it shall be granted."

"You might—for a short time," he said, speaking in the same guarded undertone. "Just while I go and give Sarah a few directions about a certain drink I've ordered; but," laying a detaining hand on the other's arm, "the first sign of waking, you bolt and tell me. Can't risk agitating recognitions, and that sort of nonsense. You understand?"

Fane nodded, half-impatiently, as if the caution were absurdly superfluous, and advanced to take the doctor's place.

He hardly dared to look at the sleeping face; and when, with an effort, he did raise his eyes, he started. She was so changed—even since yesterday. She lay white and worn in the sleep of exhaustion. The change was most pitiful.

He had not sat there five minutes when she began to stir restlessly. Her weary head moved uneasily, and a low sighing moan came from her lips as she tried unsuccessfully, in her unconsciousness, to find a more comfortable position. She seemed so fast in that sleep of exhaustion, that Fane considered it safe to attempt re-arranging her pillows. He softly slipped his arm under her head the next time

it wearily turned, and with his skilled strength raised her gently, in order to turn the pillow. But that was unnecessary, for the beautiful head sank upon his shoulder restfully, and a faint sigh of weary relief fluttered from the pale lips. The man's face flushed; the tears started to his eyes. He stood motionless; he would not have moved her then had an angel bade him do so. He hung over her with adoring, grateful tenderness. It was like forgiveness from her. The white, wan face lay close to his; he might have bent his head only an inch or two lower, and touched the pure cheek with his lips—but she was safe. He could no more have taken advantage then than he could have robbed the dead. Indeed, the idea did not so much as even occur to him. A great humility had come over him; he, who had set himself up in such scorn about women, who had said those bitter, slighting, mocking words about this one above all the others, felt now that he was unworthy to touch her; unworthy to come with his man's careless past into the presence of this pure-hearted, blameless creature. Unworthy? ten thousand times unworthy! What a sharp contrast there was between that pleasant life of his, with its amusements and its self-centred interests, and

the white life of a good woman! And he, like so many others, had taken for granted that only the sweetest, most innocent and unworldly creature in the best bloom of her womanhood was worthy of his serious thought.

He did not think this out then; how could he, with Edith's weary cheek nestling on his shoulder, and her soft breathing drawn within his arm? He gazed down at her, and one great tear fell sparkling to the sheet.

He was standing in the same position ten minutes later—for Edith had lain restfully and easily, and had not stirred since he raised her—when Dr. Fullagher returned. The doctor's step was noiseless. He reached the foot of the bed before Fane was aware of his entrance. The glimpse Dr. Fullagher had of the absorbed, rapt expression of his friend's face paralysed him for an instant. Then Fane raised his head, with a far-away look in his eyes. The doctor came hastily forward.

"Put her down! You shouldn't have disturbed her," he said, in a wrathful whisper.

"I didn't," said Fane, almost dreamily. "She was restless. I wanted to move the pillow. and she——"

The dreamy look disappeared, and a slight flush rose to his brow.

The doctor was deftly shaking the pillows. "There, lay her down," he said, curtly, when he had arranged them. Fane obeyed and gently withdrew his arm.

"Such consummate folly!" said Fullagher, in a vehement undertone, keeping his watchful eyes on the sleeping face, which wore a troubled expression.

"Hush!" whispered Fane.

"Hush, indeed!" in a tone of exasperated amazement. "Good Lord!—Sarah is coming to mount guard now; we may as well walk home together. If you'll wait for me down-stairs, I'll follow as soon as she appears."

Fane went below, and almost directly after the two doctors left the house. Fullagher set off at a brisk pace, keeping silence for at least a dozen yards.

"Look here," said he, then, somewhat abruptly, "I am going to indulge myself in a rare luxury."

"What may the luxury be?"

"I am going to act the part of a true friend. I am about to offer a word of advice."

"Ah!—To me, I suppose?"

"You have divined my purpose accurately."

"Proceed," said Fane, rather absently.

The doctor paused. "Well, you see, it's rather a delicate matter."

"I never knew you shy before, Fullagher."

"Don't be disagreeable, Fane. I'm not shy—never was in my life, to my remembrance. What I wish to say is this: I consider this case mine—the one we have just come from—and I give you fair warning I won't have your interference with it any longer."

"He calls this a word of advice," said Fane, apostrophising a lamp-post they were passing.

"Hang it all! A man must speak as he can. I adopted the mentor and sentimental tone at the beginning—you must confess I made a gallant start—but one can't keep up a *rôle* long. Seriously, it won't do. Fane—not in your position. It looks too peculiar. You will do harm by hanging about her house, and God knows there has been enough cackling about the poor thing already—harm to her and to Miss Lorimer. There, is that plain enough?"

"Say all you have to say."

"I will," said the doctor, firmly. "Damn it! am I a puling schoolgirl, to be afraid of preventing nonsense by giving the pain of a plain word? I've been a doctor too long to shrink from sharp surgery, if need be for it. I needn't remind you what people are; you must see yourself what

severe temptation you will give them by paying professional visits absolutely unneeded—absolutely unneeded,” he repeated, separating the words carefully into their syllables; “mark that, my friend. You see, *I* don’t consider myself in my dotage yet, nor will an astute public in this case. A natural love for scandal will open their eyes as to the undiminished vigour of my medical powers; I shall again be done justice to as in the days wherein I practised. They will forget how antediluvian my knowledge is. ‘What the devil,’ the idiots will say, ‘are two doctors wanted for when she is out of danger? what does this waste of professional energy mean? “miching mallecho,” it means mischief;’ trust their perseverance if they don’t come to that conclusion before long! And then they will raise the place with their confounded cackling. You simply have not thought of it yet. I know,” and the doctor loudly cleared his throat; “I know you think too well of her not to wish to avoid causing her the slightest annoyance. I need not appeal to you on the score of her present helpless condition.”

“There is no need to appeal to me at all,” broke in Fane, in a low, stern voice. “I shall not go to her house again. Thanks for reminding me, Fullagher.”

The doctor slipped his hand through his friend’s

arm, and said no more on the subject. The approaching figure of Reginald Milward made a change easy.

"Behold the bereaved young man! Sir Reginald, how are the happy pair?"

"Which happy pair?" growled Reginald, with not unnatural dryness.

"True; I forgot. There are two. Well, age first—what is the news from paradise?"

The young man gave himself a twist, expressive of impatience, and then a slow smile crept over his earnest countenance. "Happy nations, they say, have no history," he said, with laborious thoughtfulness. "I suppose the remark will hold good for private individuals; we may conclude, therefore, that the bridal pair are in the monotonous stage when news is unnecessary."

"You unfilial young devil!" cried the doctor. "By-the-by, when do *you* leave the paternal nest?"

"I am merely staying in order to superintend the business until my father returns."

"Magnanimity is a great virtue; you can't do better than practise it," said Fullagher, nodding as he passed on.

He discoursed eloquently upon the two marriages which had taken place a week ago, almost unnoticed as far as he and his friend were con-

cerned. There was the relief of returning to the freedom of everyday interests in his remarks; the pressure of anxiety was removed, and he could indulge in scoffs at the blissful future before the wedded pairs.

“On the whole,” said he, as they neared home, “I incline to pity the bridegroom in both cases—I generally do, by the way—but there seems no doubt about their need for commiseration in these two marriages. Both the hoary Milward and the imbecilely amiable Jack, will find subjection their only chance of domestic peace. Poor devils! who would be a fool?”

They stopped before Fane’s door, and Fullagher glanced doubtfully at his friend. “Can you come and dine with me this evening?” asked he.

Fane hesitated. “I don’t think I can this evening, thanks. I’ve a great deal to do.”

“All right. Another time.”

The doctor waved a friendly adieu, and went on to his own door.

Fane gave a short laugh as he opened his; he quite understood that bland acceptance of his refusal—the doctor was shy of a man in trouble.

After all, he was as loth to spend the evening in his friend’s society as his friend was to have him; and, moreover, his reason for refusing was a true reason. There were arrears of work to be

got through. Of course, he had visited his patients, and made up prescriptions this last fortnight, but all that could be left undone he had left undone. Looking back now on those fearful days, it seemed as if he had lived through them in the miserable flurry and confusion of an uncomfortable dream; there had been all the tantalising incoherence, the driven haste, of a disagreeable dream. The doctor's words of friendly "advice" had rudely startled him; it was as if the cold light of day was suddenly let in upon the feverish visions of night. Fane began his work with the trembling sensation of one who has been roughly awakened. What had he been doing? How had he betrayed himself? The excitement of overstrained feeling and intense agitation passed, and the reaction was correspondingly severe, and unutterably chill and depressing.

He acknowledged the justice of that "advice," but, being a proud man, and one who had hitherto given no occasion for interference in his private affairs, he was none the less mortified and humiliated because the doctor's words were words of wisdom. He was to be banished from her sick-room—had he had time to think he would have seen that it must be so, Dr. Fullagher was the suitable person to attend her; but he had not

had time! There were those days when everything was merged in the one terrible fear, then that brief space of highly-wrought emotion this afternoon—his friend had had his wits about him and seen the danger,—it was galling to reflect how he had exposed himself to calm criticism! What, for instance, must Miss Jacques think? The light of common day can have a scathing influence at times.

Dr. Fullagher was very considerate during those next days. He always contrived to give Fane the morning's bulletin as soon as possible; and he did it in a frank, matter-of-course way, acknowledging his friend's interest as the most natural thing in the world.

"I shall make my best bow, and retire from active service soon," he said, a week after. "Now she has her wits about her, I feel a delicacy about intruding. Miss Jacques is to be trusted."

Accordingly, a few days later, he announced that he had paid his last professional visit at No. 20 for the present.

"Miss Jacques is going to carry off her patient to The Cottage as soon as she can be moved. I stipulated that I should see her again further on, in order to pronounce on her fitness for the move."

At the beginning of March, Dr. Fullagher

decided that Edith might go to The Cottage. He would have put off the change a little longer, but Miss Jacques was too impatient to have her friend in her own house.

"She will recover three times as fast in the country," she said, with decision.

"Country!" jeered the doctor.

"Pray, what else? How is she to get well in a place full of such painful associations as her own house is?"

"There is something in that," he admitted.

"Something? Everything! There is something, too, in the fact that she could go to The Cottage weeks before she is able to travel to a place which *you* would call country."

"Well, well. I acknowledge your superior wisdom. Will that do?"

"Partly. And now, when may I take her home?"

"And they say women are unpractical!" gasped he.

"Yes; they do. But *you* never did! You have always credited us with every virtue. I have always felt sure of our receiving justice at your hands."

"This," mused the doctor, "is evidently a specimen of feminine cajolery."

"There is no other kind, surely?" asked Miss

Jacques, opening innocent eyes. "If there is, pray give me a specimen of it!"

When the day of departure came, Dr. Fullagher helped Edith carefully into the cab, and watched them start, with a somewhat grave expression of anxiety.

"It will be all right, doctor," said Miss Jacques, nodding cheerfully. "Call to-morrow, and see for yourself how the drive has been borne, will you?"

"I think I will," he replied. "I should like to see how the country looks at this time of year."

Miss Jacques only laughed, and the cab drove slowly away.

The doctor turned to see Winifred, with very wet eyes, watching it too.

"Why, what's to become of you?" he exclaimed.

"I am going to stay with Mrs. Chutterworth," said Winnie, choking down her tears.

"At—The Elms?"

"No; The Cedars," smiling.

"Ah, of course—the young couple. Well, I hope you will enjoy it," he said, kindly. "Can I take you there?"

Winifred thanked him. Mrs. Jack would call for her directly.

"Then I'll take myself off; you must be busy." He looked back after he had shaken hands. "There's no need for any fretting, she'll do, right enough."

"She looked so terribly weak," said Winnie, with a sob.

"She'll pick up wonderfully in a day or two, mark my words;" and, nodding with kindly assurance, the doctor walked away.





CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST OF MAY.

MISS JACQUES was proud of her cottage drawing-room, and with good reason. In summer it was especially delightful, with its delicate colouring, old-fashioned furniture and ornaments, and fragrance of fresh flowers. There was a quaint, diamond-paned window at one side, shaded by a thick frame of ivy-leaves, and at the end a glass door opened upon the trimly-kept lawn in front of the cottage. The first half of the garden was lawn and flower-beds, and this part was divided from the useful part by a trellis-work partition, smothered in luxuriant creepers. There was surely no prettier nor more cheerful place for an invalid to recover strength in. And so Edith thought. After the first deathlike weakness—when she was too wan and weary to notice or care for anything—had passed, the days were full of grateful peace to her. The silence of the country was infinitely

resting ; the spring days, bringing re-awakening to the earth, brought to her also reviving, and the healthful influences of life and hope. Gradually, as spring changed to early summer, she regained health, and with health elasticity of spirits. Each slight improvement, each gain of strength, was a joy to her ; and joy undimmed by any shadow from the weeks of morbid misery that had preceded her illness, for, to her great thankfulness, physical suffering seemed to have rid her of the mental wretchedness—making it a distant memory only. She could look back at the past calmly and healthfully, and forward to the future with gentle, chastened hopefulness. But for days she did neither, yielding herself wholly to this curious experience of gradually returning strength ; it was so good to be passive, to rest in such luxurious completeness, to put aside worldly struggling and plans. When she could observe the growing beauties of the earth, her pure pleasure amounted to delight. The tender colours of spring deepened as her eyes and brain strengthened ; and now the first of May had come, a poet's May day, and she lay on the couch, looking out with glad, admiring eyes.

Miss Jacques had been busy decking the room with flowers. She had filled the vases and the large china bowl on the table in the morning,

and after their early dinner she fastened two pale monthly roses in the bosom of Edith's white dress.

"They match the varying colour of your cheeks, my dear," she said. And Edith smiled and thanked her.

Later in the afternoon Miss Jacques descended from her bedroom, arrayed in black silk and a fine lace cap, and carrying a parcel. "Look here," she said, undoing it, and shaking out a cloth for afternoon tea. "Do you like it?"

"Crewel-work! I did not know you went in for such vanities."

"It was a present from an old pupil. I have had it by me for at least three years, lying idle for want of a great and suitable occasion; but I shall tell Hannah to bring it in this afternoon."

"Why?" asked Edith, who felt the question was expected from her.

"Because, my dear, I expect visitors. Your doctors are coming."

The "varying colour" Miss Jacques had mentioned rose in the delicate cheeks now.

"Both?" in slight surprise.

"Acquaintance makes great strides when people are sharing anxiety," remarked Miss Jacques, surveying the cloth with her head on

one side. "You will not be angry if I say I like Dr. Fane?"

"Of course not!—what nonsense! From what you have told me he was most kind."

"He was," said Miss Jacques, putting down the cloth, and taking the seat opposite her friend. "My dear, you have won a most devoted worshipper in the person of your old enemy. In consequence of which fact I have forgiven all his sins against you."

"The devotion must be of the same imaginative kind as the sins," said Edith, laughing rather nervously. "He is kind-hearted—he is a gentleman, and of course did his best."

"Yes; and I have found out much more. The man was completely broken down during your danger; he could not hide it. Who went and punished Nicholson?—forgive me, dear," as Edith winced. "I know about that last straw; and I know, too—what I suppose you had not time to hear—that Dr. Fane left the town-hall at once, and went and knocked the wretch down."

"Did he?" said Edith, catching her breath, and a soft illumination coming over her shrinking face. For some reason her heart leaped, and her eyes grew dreamy and far-away.

"I believe he would give his life to bring back

your happiness," said Miss Jacques, bluntly. "Remember the fire, Edith; remember the trouble he took to bring you tidings of the poor sufferers."

"I remember everything," said Edith, quickly. "Do you think it is possible for me ever to forget? But why do you say all this, Miss Jacques?"

"Why? Oh, who knows? It can't do any good—only somehow I wanted you to know. The diet of inappreciation and opposition is bitter. I want you to know that the man we thought your enemy, who derided you in the lump with strong-minded fanatics before he saw you, has made complete atonement. I want you to have the triumph of knowing that—he loves you, in short. Why, my dear Edith, do you suppose his behaviour is to be set down to benevolent compassion? Do you suppose if you were plain and insignificant he would have taken your part so warmly? Never!"

"Miss Jacques! what are you saying?"

"I have done it!" cried Miss Jacques, whimsically. "Indiscretion with the tongue was always my failing. But truth is truth."

"I hope this is only a mistake," cried Edith, sitting up in dismay. "Oh yes, it is—it must be. You are joking; remember Miss Lorimer."

Miss Jacques shot a queer glance at the disturbed face. Her opinion of masculine constancy was not high.

"You are very innocent," she observed. "Of course I remember Miss Lorimer, and of course he will keep true to her; but may I not rejoice at his receiving a little wholesome chastisement?"

"I thought you liked him," said Edith, a little drily.

"I am an old disciplinarian. My liking never stood in the way of my punishing a child. Now I will go and tell Hannah about the tea; in certain matters she is as obtuse as the veriest dunce I ever had to cope with."

Miss Jacques departed to the kitchen, having provided ample food for her friend's meditation during her absence. Edith carefully went over her short acquaintance with Dr. Fane; it was only too easy to remember every episode; but her conclusion was not the same as Miss Jacques's. She was too simple, too unself-conscious to entertain such an idea on—what appeared to her—such very insufficient grounds. He had seen scarcely anything of her, and he was an engaged man. Miss Jacques had made a romantic mistake; she had misconstrued his behaviour—the result of deep regret—and explained it by a very unlikely motive.

Edith thought she could understand his regret. To her it seemed only natural that a generous, warm-hearted man should attempt what reparation lay in his power. Such a simple thing needed nothing so out of the way as a great passion to account for it. She smiled as she thought of the absurd freak played by her friend's imagination. She was still unconventional, or, as Miss Jacques said, "innocent" on many points.

She rose from the couch presently, and stood within the doorway. The smooth lawn, decked with its gay flower-beds, lay before her, steeped in the sunshine which gave jewel-like brilliancy and distinctness to each petal. On either hand were neighbouring gardens, the road below them judiciously hidden by shrubs and fruit trees; while beyond the invisible road was the soft greenness of meadows and tender corn-fields, varied by a tree here and there, and the rich red-brown or cream-white of grazing cattle. Against the soft blue sky rose the faint line of low hills. The birds sang joyously. It was a day on which one could understand David's calling upon the earth to be glad—one on which he might have said, "The little hills rejoice on every side."

Edith stepped on to the sunny grass and

wandered slowly over it, taking shy, uncertain steps, and looking around at every flower and every tree with eager delight. The world was new to her again. Her brain was cleared and healed. All was beautiful.

Miss Jacques returned to the drawing-room, and, finding her friend had vanished, she came out on the lawn too, and sat down on one of the rustic seats amid her flowers. The pretty old lady, with grey hair and lace cap, knitting busily and glancing about her every now and then, made a fitting figure for the background of picturesque, creeper-covered cottage, and the foreground of soft green and brilliant flowers.

The sound of steps crunching the gravel came to her ears, and presently the doctor's portly figure appeared, followed by Fane.

"Arcadia!" cried Dr. Fullagher, waving his hand fully six yards off.

"I hope you will find it as pleasant as long as you are here," said Miss Jacques, going forward a little. She smiled kindly upon them both. "How do you do, doctor? Welcome to Arcadia, Dr. Fane. Isn't the weather beautiful?"

"De-light-ful," said Fullagher, appreciatively.

"Did you walk?" asked Miss Jacques, as he produced a cambric handkerchief of vast proportions and passed it over his heated brow.

"It wasn't my doing," replied he, in a muffled voice behind the voluminous folds. "I wanted to drive like a gentleman, but Fane, here, refused to be mewed up, as he called it, in a brougham—a mere excuse to avoid giving me a lift. I suggested hiring an open thing, but he grew more violent then, and declared I should come on my own legs or not at all."

"Come, Fullagher," remonstrated his friend.

"He said walking was good for me—as if that was any inducement," said the doctor, pathetically. Then he glanced round. "Where is our patient?"

"Indoors, I believe," answered Miss Jacques. "She will be here directly."

"Getting on fairly, eh?"

"Very fairly, I think. I hope you will be satisfied."

"Well, you know, it's best not to be too sanguine. I don't want too rapid a recovery—not with Miss Romney. The difficulty with her will be to keep her to invalid habits long enough. I've a notion she will go on the line of over-doing herself."

"You must caution her," said Miss Jacques, "if you find it necessary. Mind, I am making no complaints. She has been as good as gold. She gives me no trouble."

"Then there is no need for my interference," said Dr. Fullagher. "Let well alone is a very good motto; one worthy to be quoted by our friend the brewer."

"That's rather a shabby way of smuggling in a hackneyed remark you are ashamed of! Don't you think so, Dr. Fane?" said Miss Jacques, turning with a laugh to the long figure half-lying on the grass.

"It's rather a favourite way with the doctor," said Fane, lazily.

The doctor nodded. "One for me. It would have been wiser not to mention the carriage dispute."

"Have you seen the happy bridegroom since his return, doctor?" inquired Miss Jacques.

"Seen him!" he groaned. "Ay; and, what's more to the purpose, I've heard him. I was obliged to pay a call of condolence, you know: but it will be a long day before I repeat it. He's as rampant as ever; marriage has not even begun to cure his lunaey. He quite misunderstood the nature of my visitation—thought I had come to rejoice—no doubt to envy! Benighted idiot! He spent his honeymoon in reading poetry to his bride, and has laid in a new stock of quotations—mawkishly sentimental. Let me see, can I remember one? I should like

to give you an idea of his condition. This was one of his gems :

‘ Without the home that plighted love endears,
Without the smiles from plighted beauty won,
Oh ! what were man ?—a world without a sun.’

When a man has fallen so low his ease is hopeless. I wash my hands of Milward. By-the-by, he has brought home a new hobby.”

“ Of course. What is it ? Alchemy ?—transmuting copper to wedding-rings ? ”

“ Much worse—for his friends. What say you to photography ? ”

Miss Jaques uttered an exelamation. “ Ah ! ” she said, with much feeling.

“ You see it won’t be safe to call for the next two months, for I fear the craze will run a fairly long course. If I were a philanthropist now,” said Fullagher, tilting back his rustie chair, and gazing up into the sky—“ if even I had ordinary sympathy for my neighbours, I should consider it my duty to put an advertisement into the local papers, eautioning Milward’s friends—warning them against calling at his house for the space of eight weeks or so. As I am not quite so foolish as to care whether they are victimised or not, I rather enjoy the thought of what’s in store for them. I got off pretty easily myself ; I was not asked for an immediate

sitting—only called upon to admire some likenesses of Mrs. Milward.”

“You would find that easy,” said Miss Jacques, ironically.

“I did. I was in a hurry to escape. It was not a moment for conscientious scruples. I dared not risk an argument.”

“Mrs. Jack Chutterworth has been here several times,” observed Miss Jacques.

“She’s a worthy daughter of her father,” said the doctor. He threw back his head and laughed. “I’ve seen her, too, and I enjoyed the sight amazingly. She has bloomed out in all the colours of the rainbow since her marriage; artistic tints are quite discarded. She has also taken to keeping some wretched apologies for pets she calls dogs. I was coming up London Road the other day, when I saw her bearing down upon me with a whole pack of the creatures at her heels, led by scarlet strings, and jingling with silver bells. She appeared to find great difficulty in proceeding, for the ranks of the pampered pugs were sadly broken and harassed by the attacks of a hideous little cur, whose feelings had evidently been outraged at the sight of creatures, remotely related to his own species, being led in such state and splendour. He literally surrounded them, yelping and snap-

ping at each in turn. I slunk into the doorway of a shop to see the procession pass, but, unfortunately, I was detected—smiling my broadest—and Mrs. Jack besought me by all that I held dear, to drive away that ‘hateful monster.’ ‘Which?’ says I. ‘There are so many it’s difficult to see at a glance.’ ‘That *horrid* animal,’ she said, quite indignantly. ‘Why, I was admiring him as the best of the bunch,’ says I; ‘the only alive specimen of the exhibition.’ I believe she called me unfeeling; but I drove the beast away, and recommended her to let the pugs take their airing in an extra-sized perambulator for the future.”

“You are not an ideal champion of distressed beauty, Dr. Fullagher,” said Miss Jacques, laughing.

“I see no beauty in dogs,” replied he. Then he rose with an alert air. “Now for the chickens. I must see them.”

“This way, then,” said Miss Jacques, and she led him round the side of the cottage to the back.

Fane did not follow. He lay still a moment or two, and then got on to his feet. He had nerved himself for meeting Edith, and had been prepared to see her at once. This delay, however, seemed to break down his preparation, and,

when left alone, the fact that she might issue before him at any moment, made havoc in his carefully assumed composure. He was not yet ready after all. He wanted still some preparation; and he sauntered over the grass towards the kitchen garden. A trellis archway, thickly covered with leaves, led from the ornamental division to the useful. Fane bent his lofty head and passed through, then stopped short. Straight in front of him, at the end of the vista of green formed by bushes and trees, was Edith. Her tall, slender figure in its soft white dress, over which wavered flecked sunshine and shade, was thrown slightly back, as, with up-turned face of rapt enjoyment, she listened to a black-bird. Against the background of tender green, the fair, delicate lines of her face and figure were relieved in clear, soft distinctness. The beautiful head and profile, the slightly parted lips, the faint colour, the drooping hand and wrist—he noticed all. She was transformed from the Edith he had known; she had passed from winter to spring. She was more beautiful even than he had supposed; but she seemed like a stranger at that first glance.

He went very slowly towards her. She heard his step, and brought her eyes from the tall tree almost overhead. For a moment she paused,

the bright colour of weakness passing over her face, then she came forward and held out her thin white hand, smiling. He clasped it in silence; there was a consciousness, almost a constraint between them, which seemed to spring up as their eyes met. Neither knew which pair sank first.

“I did not know you had come,” said Edith, linking her right fingers with her left, and feeling even through her own touch the strong clasp of his hand.

“How are you?” said Fane, in the earnest tone of one who wants an answer.

“Thank you, much better; nearly myself again. Don’t you think I do Miss Jacques’s—and Sarah’s, I must not forget her—don’t you think I do their nursing great credit?” And then, as he glanced in reply to this invitation for inspection, she moved aside a little, and added quickly—“It is the most wonderful experience, this gradual return of strength. I feel so lightened, so unencumbered, so refreshed, now that terrible helplessness has left me; I feel as if I were learning to live again. I have never had a long illness before. I don’t think I knew how beautiful the world was until now. Oh, is it not beautiful?” she said, in an almost childlike rapture, looking around with eager, shining eyes.

There was a child's purity of complexion, a childlike simplicity of expression on her face. He looked at her, half-bewildered. Was it inconsistent, was it selfish of him to feel a half-grudging of this delight? When she was in despair he had longed only to have that despair lightened. It was lightened, evidently; she had thrown it off like a crushing pall; but, strange to say, Fane, instead of rejoicing in singleness of heart, experienced a chill sense of remoteness, as he noted the sweet brightness of her eyes and lips. Little as he had done before, there was absolutely nothing to be done for her now. She needed him not at all.

"Don't you think one must be well when one can feel that the mere fact of living is a pleasure?" said Edith. Surprised at receiving no answer, she turned, and met his wistful gaze full upon her. She was startled; she caught her breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Fane; "I—I did not hear."

Her last remark had escaped her memory: in her weakness she grew nervous. She stooped abruptly, and lifted the branch of a gooseberry bush.

"There is a good promise of fruit for Miss Jacques, don't you think so?"

Fane bent to look. Their hands touched as he raised the same bough—touched and thrilled.

“Her garden seems very fertile,” he replied.

There was a short silence, but there was no awkwardness in the pause, for perhaps neither was quite aware of it. Fane was absorbed in his consciousness of Edith’s presence; in the disturbing sense that she was there, close beside him; that the brightness he saw from under lowered eyelids was the skirt of her white dress. While Edith was trying to conquer the inexplicable constraint and shyness which had come over her, the curious embarrassment which made it difficult for her to look at her companion, and to speak easily to him. The fault was Miss Jacques’s absurd talk. It was a little mortifying to be affected so much by nonsense; but remembering that the nonsense was to blame helped very quickly to restore her composure. She began walking towards the other part of the garden. The path was not broad enough for two to walk abreast in comfort, and Fane followed. Presently Edith stopped and turned, as if she had remembered something.

“Oh, Dr. Fane!”

“Yes?”

“I want to thank you for your kindness when I was ill.”

"There is nothing to thank me for," he said, trying to speak carelessly. "Dr. Fullagher constituted himself your medical attendant, and he was most tenacious of his rights, I assure you. I merely called once or twice at the worst in—in consultation."

"Yes ; I know how good Dr. Fullagher was," she said, and then smiled, her grave, sweet smile. "But you must not forbid my thanks ; I should feel ungrateful. Miss Jacques has told me about your kindness."

"Kindness ?—Miss Jacques, too ! I thought she hated me !"

"You would think so no longer if you could hear her speak about you."

"Then I wish I could, most fervently. I have a weakness for approbation."

Edith laughed. He remembered it was the first time he had heard her laugh.





CHAPTER X.

THE DOCTOR DISCOURSES.

“All this is the natural consequence of teaching girls to read.”—*The Rivals*.

THEIR return to the lawn interrupted a warm dispute between Miss Jacques and Dr. Fullagher upon some detail of poultry-keeping. The doctor was authoritatively laying down the law, tossing about his long beard, as his manner was in vehement discussion, when the younger lady and gentleman appeared on the scene. Fullagher's eloquence was checked in full tide as soon as he caught sight of Edith; he eyed her from under his shaggy brows with some discomposure.

“How do you do, Miss Romney?” he said, in a jerky, awkward fashion. “I'm glad to see you on your feet—don't over-do it, you know.”

“There is no danger,” she said, brightly.

“You must be careful,” murmured he,

absently, gazing at her the while as if half-fascinated. He had not seen her since the day after she left Wanningster, when she was haggard and weak with illness.

"You seem to be having a dispute," observed Fane to Miss Jacques.

"That is unavoidable where Dr. Fullagher is," said she, severely.

"Here have I," said Fullagher, making a gesture of display; "here have I kept birds for over fifteen years, studied the best authorities, and applied endless experiments, and yet, when I offer a hint as to the management of a handful of chickens, it is received with scorn, instead of the seemly deference demanded by my rich experience!"

"A hint!" cried Miss Jacques. "I should certainly receive a hint of yours with deference, doctor, not to say alarm. Have you ever kept chickens?"

"No; but I know how they ought to be kept, and that is what most people don't know who do the keeping."

"You haven't taught him civility, Dr. Fane!" exclaimed Miss Jacques.

"I never attempt the impossible," replied Fane.

"And he frightened Tom away," went on

the old lady, with lively indignation, "because the poor dear fellow followed me to see those wretched chickens."

"Who is Tom?" asked Fane.

"A poor dear fellow," said the doctor, in a tone of sentimental affection, and then burst out—"A skulking, hypocritical, malicious monster, who commits wholesale murder and abominable cruelty, and pretends affection for the sake of being stroked and fed with dainties."

"I hope he is securely chained up," said Fane, casting an uneasy glance round.

Edith looked at him with a laugh in her eyes, and then said encouragingly to Miss Jacques: "Tom will come back soon."

"Trust him!" cried the doctor. "Cats always know where they are well fed."

"I wish I had held my tongue about those birds Tom caught and killed lately," exclaimed Miss Jacques. "Whatever made me relate his exploits? It was that which roused the doctor's temper; he drove the poor dear away frightened out of his wits."

"And a good thing too; he ought to be a homeless wanderer for the rest of his days," said the culprit, fiercely.

"You have done your best to make him one!"

"I'm glad of it! Bloodthirsty scoundrel!"

"Really, Fullagher, it is very painful to hear of your misbehaving yourself in this way," said Fane, in fine displeasure.

"I think," said the doctor, changing the subject with ready tact—"I think Miss Romney should rest now." And he hesitatingly approached her, and offered his arm. "Will you allow me to exert a physician's authority, and take you to the couch?"

"You must not consider me an invalid now," said Edith, as she took his arm.

"No?" said he, hardly able to keep his eyes off her delicate face. "You look fragile enough," he added, in a gentle voice.

He conducted her carefully to the couch, and placed her in its corner, arranging the cushions with a skilful hand, and bringing a footstool. Edith was touched by such tender care, and her smile of thanks was a little tremulous. Having settled her to his satisfaction, Fullagher retreated to the further end of the room, and seated himself where he could steal furtive glances at his late patient. Tea was brought in, and he and Miss Jacques forgot their dispute, and grew friendly again over that cheering beverage. Fane, after handing cups and cake, took up

a position on the window step without, leaning back against the side of the frame opposite Edith.

“How is the estimable woman?” inquired Dr. Fullagher, presently.

Edith looked inquiring. Miss Jacques laughed.

“He means Sarah,” she said; “no other paragon. Dr. Fullagher has been searching for a woman all his life; the whole sex ought to feel honoured in knowing he has at last found his ideal.”

“She has gone home to L— for a holiday,” said Edith, grateful for this interest in her old servant.

“But she didn’t want to go,” added Miss Jacques. “She can hardly bear her mistress out of her sight; she trusts neither my nursing nor Hannali’s cooking powers.”

“Perhaps her notions on the management of chickens are sound.” The doctor offered this explanation with an amiable air of innocence.

Miss Jacques disdained a reply.

“Sarah,” went on Fullagher, “belongs to an almost extinct race—the race commonly termed ‘Treasures.’ You are fortunate in possessing such a noble specimen, Miss Romney.”

Edith agreed cordially to this.

Miss Jacques was called away to speak to some one at this juncture.

"Miss Jacques tells me, Miss Romney," said the doctor, "that you think of going to one of the large manufacturing towns."

"Yes," said Edith.

"Have you thought of an appointment at a children's hospital?"

"That is what I wish to try for," she said; "I think it would give me the best start."

"Quite right," said the doctor, "quite right—that is to say as you intend to stick to the profession. Now there is a child's hospital at Ucclesfield, just started, and I know one or two men who have influence in the concern: if you think well of it, I shall be happy to do all in my power to secure you the appointment. I flatter myself my good word would go a long way towards securing it for you; Kennedy, the man who's head and chief in the affair, he and I are old friends. Ucclesfield is as dirty and noisy a town as you'll find in England," he went on, as Edith was about to speak. "but it has money in it, and if you want to doctor the herd, there's your chance, for it literally swarms with factory people, and such small deer."

"Thank you, Dr. Fullagher," she said, with quiet earnestness. "I accept your offer gratefully."

"I would rather you refused it," said he, bluntly.

"Refused it?" she repeated. "Why?"

"Well, that's rather a difficult question to answer," said the doctor, pulling at his beard.

Edith thought she understood his meaning.

"Ah," she said, regretfully, "I remember. You do not approve of a woman practising medicine." There was a sad ring in her voice; disapproval on that head had already cost her dear, and promised further suffering.

"I am too old to give up the traditions of a lifetime," said Fullagher, quickly, half-apologetically. "But, mind you, I don't class you with the others. You have taught me one thing, and that is, that it is absurd to speak of women as if they were one and all made in the same mould." Keenly aware of the significance of this concession, he seized on an album close at hand and began rapidly turning over the leaves.

"Do you really intend starting again?" asked Fane in a low tone, meant only for Edith's ear.

She turned, with the faint smile on her lips caused by Dr. Fullagher's last remark, and met his dark eyes, full of concern, and something very like reproach.

"Yes—of course," she said, simply.

He thought of all the first trial had involved, and gazed at her with a miserable wonder and entreaty.

Edith looked down rather nervously, turning pale.

"I must try again," she said in a desolate, proud tone. "Before my illness it seemed impossible, but that feeling has passed. It will take another defeat to convince me that I am wrong. I cannot help shocking your prejudices."

Fane rose to his feet, and stood leaning against the window-frame.

"I am not thinking of my own prejudices, but of other people's," he said, quickly. "As for mine—that is no matter," with a dark flush; "I am not likely to come in your way again."

What Edith might have said in answer was unproved, for at that moment Dr. Fullagher left the album, and came and planted himself before her. Ever since her appearance he had been watching her, casting sidelong glances from

under his bushy brows. He had not dreamed she was so beautiful. The fine head and brow, the clustering hair, the clear-cut features, the sweet, grave mouth, the delicate complexion, and wavering of lovely colour, were a revelation to the old cynic. Regret for—what seemed to him—the sacrifice of so much beauty, moved him ; he mused, and the fire kindled.

“No, Miss Romney,” he said, as he placed himself before the couch ; “I must cherish my old ideas. They are infinitely more beautiful than the modern ones. Alas, ladies, you do not know what you are doing ! You are taking away from us our ideal of womanhood, with all its grace and loveliness, and giving us in its place only a weaker man. What do women want ? Why will they not leave to us the rough hard work of the world, and be content to reign in sheltered peace, the queens of home and of love ? We have put you on a pedestal—we would keep you above and apart from the turmoil in which it is our lot to labour, and you insist upon sharing the struggle. If you gain your unnatural wish, where will the poetry, the beauty, the grace of life be found ? What will bring out the chivalry of men ? They talk of civilisation, progress, enlightenment—folly of ignorance !—they would bring back the dark ages, barbarism, selfishness,

the reign of might. *This* is civilisation, when a woman is protected tenderly, and shielded from harm and annoyance. Give her leave to enter the lists with men, and it will be a case of every man's hand against his neighbour's, and every woman's against man's. The charm of intercourse between men and women will be broken, the bloom of courtship a thing of the past; while marriage will become a mere business-like transaction—the joining together of rival firms. Forbid it, ye gods!”

“And this man,” said Fane, “is a staunch old bachelor, and calls himself a woman-hater!”

“’Tis ever thus,” said his friend. “There is always someone at a man's elbow to sneer at his purest enthusiasm, and it has been so since the days of David.”

“You are behind the times, Fullagher,” said Fane, a little bitterness edging his bantering tone. “I am grieved at this exposing of your benighted ideas. Folly of ignorance, indeed! don't you know we have changed all that?”

Edith looked up at him with hurt surprise.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, impulsively; and, setting his teeth on his lip, he turned his head, and looked away over the garden.

“Your pleading is only one-sided. Dr. Fullagher,” said Edith, earnestly. “The picture

you draw is pretty and poetical, but terribly dear! Have you considered the sacrifices that are made to keep up this romantic ideal? You should remember that many women are driven by the sheer dread of starvation into a struggle with the world. They cannot help themselves; and, however willing men may be, they cannot help them either, except in giving them more opportunities for bread-winning. There will always be enough women to add the ornamental element to men's lives, and to bring out their chivalrous instincts; but men can, after all, only provide for their own families—and there are so many of the other women!—those with families dependent upon them, and those who are quite alone. I cannot see the terrible risks you speak of in changing the inactive, purposeless conditions of women's lives, to those of honoured usefulness and self-respect."

"I see," said the doctor, nodding his head deprecatingly; "I see. You *do* go in for women's rights. I fancied you did not."

"Yes," said Edith, firmly and gently. "I do now. I did not think or care about the question at first, but I have been obliged to do so. I have thought a great deal on the subject lately, and I see that our lot is a hard one—hard by nature, because we are physically weaker, and trebly hard

on account of the burdens and restrictions put upon us by custom."

"I have a mind open to conviction," said Fullagher; "at least, I always fancied so. I don't believe I am as mulish as many people, and I catch a faint glimmering of some reason on your side, Miss Romney. I will confess, too, that I should not like to pursue my researches under your guidance any further, for I have a humiliating sense I might find some awkward shocks to my old faiths. I call that handsome, now. It is a puzzle. Frankly, if I had sisters, I should object strongly to their doing anything for a living; in fact, I would say I should forbid it, only I fear the phrase would be distasteful to you, and I'm not sure whether after all a brother does possess divine right of authority over his sisters. But a father does over his daughters—you will allow that?"

She smiled assent.

"Well, if I had daughters I would allow them to work on no account whatever. Just or unjust, I would play the Turk with them, and keep them strictly to feminine amusements and employments. They should be dear, sweet, useless, little good-for-nothings."

"But suppose one of them had no taste for that character? Suppose her heart was set

upon doing real, honest, helpful work?—what then? Suppose the repression of her talents and ambitions cost her positive suffering, would you be justified in inflicting it upon her?”

“I don’t fancy I should ask myself that question,” said Dr. Fullagher, with his usual frankness. “I’m afraid I should take the course that would give least trouble to myself, regardless of justice. I fear I disappoint your elevated opinion of my conscientiousness; but I’m sadly sure I should bid her hold her tongue, and mend stockings. If she whimpered, I should send her to the seaside for change of air, and tell her to be grateful for her mereies—especially her greatest, her indulgent father.” The doctor stroked his beard softly, and cast a sidelong glance at Edith, to see how she would take this flippancy. She smiled only absently, for the subject was too serious and important to her for jesting.

“Yes,” she said, with feeling, “you would not dream of hurting or neglecting her physical health, but you would not scruple to deny to her all purpose and interest in life; you would crush her longings remorselessly.”

“I fear I should—except for finery, within bounds.”

"Which do you think would be harder for her?" exclaimed Edith, with an upward sweep of her eyelashes.

He could only look at her, half-dazzled for a moment.

"Miss Romney, I must implore a truce! You will convert me. I object to such an uncomfortable process at my time of life. There must be right on your side, or it would not be yours."

He looked gently and reverentially down upon her. "How far our rights go, I dare not say. We may be arrogant, selfish, unjust—God knows women have sometimes suffered cruelly at men's hands—but you must not take away one right—indeed, you cannot—the right of admiring and reverencing your goodness. Wait a moment," he added; "I believe I catch the first glimmering of an idea that may explain our tyranny. You know how the innocence and ignorance of a little child are valued—black as we are, we reverence goodness; and I think it must have been men's unconscious craving for visible goodness and purity outside and near them, something they could worship as sacred as well as love as human, which prompted them to guard women from the world."

"Don't deceive yourself, doctor," exclaimed Miss Jacques, who had entered in time to hear

his last remarks. "You fancy you are making us a handsome compliment—dear me, when will you men learn that compliments won't keep a woman's body and soul together?—when you elevate your injustice by lofty motives, but you are only showing another form of men's selfishness."

"Oh, are you there?" said the doctor, and he meekly took a chair. "Prepare, Fane, we are going to be crushed."

"You are all steeped in the same egotism—you all regard women in reference to *yourselves*," said Miss Jacques, scornfully. "Your selfishness is ludicrously transparent. Women are to be this, that, and the other, not for themselves, not for their own comfort and advantage, but because men like them to be so! They are to be men's companions, therefore some slight cultivation of their minds is desirable, as men—all being richly endowed with intellect—prefer 'intelligent' companions. Do you ever hear of men being recommended to fit themselves to be pleasant company for their wives? but, of course not—companionship is to be as one-sided as everything else; if a man sits in his chair, and varies the evening's entertainment by dozing and grumbling, he fulfils the whole duty of man."

"I am sorry I drove the cat away," murmured Dr. Fullagher, with a suppressed air.

Miss Jacques laughed, and shook her head.

"The superior being always shows his contempt for us by slighting our earnestness."

"What can he do when two still more superior are against him?" cried the doctor. "Fane gives me no help. When the forces are so unequal, I think retreat is fairly admissible." And he got up again. "My sentiment was cruelly nipped, Miss Romney," he said, "but however faulty my attempted argument may have been, I still hold to it. As people say, *there is a feeling*." This was spoken in mimicry; and Miss Jacques smiled.

"Mrs. Warren," she said, and stepped outside to speak to her other guest.

"Well, I must go," said Dr. Fullagher; "I am heartily glad to see you so far recovered."

He raised the thin white hand Edith gave him—the hand with power and will to do good work, which had been rejected; he looked at the fragile fingers lying in his broad, strong palm, squeezed them softly, and then looked into her eyes. "Don't," he said; "let me take back my promise."

"Please not! Help me in my way," said Edith, entreatingly.

“It is such a pity,” with heartfelt regret. He stooped his head, and pressed a kiss upon her hand, and then went briskly towards the other two. “We must be going, Miss Jacques. Miss Romney has had as much talk as is good for her. I hope she won’t be any the worse for it. Don’t let grief for Tom’s departure prey upon her spirits, or upon your own. There are more cats in the world—more’s the pity ; and if the ungrateful quadruped doesn’t find his way back, I’ll send you one of my own choosing, and far handsomer—no, no, that is impossible, of course—Tom stands alone in beauty. To avoid exciting affecting reminiscences, I will choose an animal as much unlike him as possible. Good afternoon.”

The two doctors departed, Dr. Fullagher turning round to assure Miss Jacques that if he saw the truant Tom skulking in any ditch he would turn his face homewards and hasten his movements.

About eight o’clock that evening Miss Jacques heard a melancholy mewing, and, on hastening to open the door, beheld her pet. The meeting was a glad one ; but whether Tom had again seen the terrible avenger of blood remained unknown to his mistress, for the want of so simple a thing as a common language.



CHAPTER XI.

“ I MAY NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN.”

“ . . . loving burns you up,
And mars the grace and joyous wit you had,
Turning your speech to sad, your face to strange,
Your mirth to nothing.”—*Chastelard*.

EDITH was not so well next morning. She suffered the languor and depression of reaction. The weather, too, was less bright, and no doubt that affected her spirits. She lay on the couch, gazing out with wide, mournful eyes. Would she ever be really strong again?—or was she to be weak and nervous, at the mercy of the changeable weather? The interest she had felt in her future yesterday, the eagerness which had met the doctor's suggestion, were dull and quenched to-day.

“ Starting again ” seemed too serious an undertaking ; in her over-wearied state of mind and body she could take no pleasure in looking forward to it. Was it after all worth while to

make the effort? to invite a repetition of her experiences and failures in Wanningster? Nothing appeared desirable but rest and calm.

Miss Jacques came and laid a cool, soft hand on her brow, and caressingly stroked the wavy locks.

“You are tired after yesterday,” she said; “the talk was too much for you.”

The matter-of-fact explanation of her listlessness was relief itself.

“Yes; that is it; that is all,” said Edith. “I have been forgetting I am not quite strong again yet; and I felt dismayed.” She burst into tears.

Miss Jacques soothed and comforted her.

“After an illness like yours, you must be content to lie by for a time,” she said. “Be wise, and put all thought of work out of your head for another week or two.”

“Yes; I will be sensible,” said Edith, penitently.

“Try and be all body for a while; and now get a little doze.”

Miss Jacques stole away to leave her to sleep. The tears did Edith good. She obeyed her friend’s advice, and left off fretting about her weakness. But the old charm of her convalescence seemed broken. The acquiescence and

content were gone. She felt restless and unsettled.

She rose presently and put on her hat, which she had brought down-stairs with her, and went out into the garden.

The sky was grey instead of blue, the sunshine only came in fitful gleams; was this why she felt no return of yesterday's rapture in the country's beauty? She strolled down to the little rustic gate, half-smothered in its luxuriant arch of ivy, and leaning upon it, looked out into the road. From the field on the opposite side came the shrill voices and merry laughter of children. A strange sense of loneliness oppressed Edith, and the happy babble of almost baby voices drew her to see the owners, who were hidden by the hedge. She opened the garden gate and crossed the road. The field was large, and its gate a little distance up the road. She walked slowly to it, and looked into the field. It was a meadow full of buttercups. Close at hand could be seen each separate flower standing in the grass, with its petals of varnished yellow shining as the sun shone; further off they massed themselves into clumps, and finally the grass was lost altogether in the broad slopes of rich golden colour which stretched to the further hedge and some graceful trees. Sunshine and

shadow passed over in turn. A footpath led across slantwise. Edith opened the gate and took the path, for the children were down by the hedge, and still invisible. A few steps brought them into view—a group of some half dozen cottage children in straight nondescript-coloured frocks and pinafores, with sunburnt hats, and uncovered chubby arms. A girl of ten sat knitting, a baby at her feet; a little thing about three years younger, with light hair falling on each side a pretty rosy face, was intent upon the adornment of her torn straw hat with flowers; two or three smaller creatures were playing together in the unclassable play of childhood; and a sturdy baby boy, just able to toddle, stood up, half-covered by the tall grass and buttercups, revelling in their profusion and uttering shouts now and then of sheer delight, as he grasped them in his fat hands, and attempted to trample them under his baby feet. Edith stood still and watched them. She did not like to go nearer—a stranger would have taken away the unconsciousness; perhaps have stopped the happy play altogether. She wished to enjoy it as it was. The glad voices were music to her. She had one wish, and that was to clasp the laughing toddler in her arms and kiss him. The children disregarded her. Whether

the compliment of the tall lady's notice gratified them, and they pursued their gambols from a courteous wish to oblige her, or they simply ignored her presence, it is of course impossible to say. Presently, one shrill young voice uttered a cry—"There's the doctor!"

Edith started. Had they recognised her? But the children's attention was not turned in her direction; she looked the same way, and saw a tall, big man's figure on the path a few yards further in the field. It was Fane. He moved as soon as she saw him; moved quickly, and with a little start, as though he had been watching her as she watched the children, and came forward. Edith did not take a step to meet him; she was too absorbed by the strange sweet confusion which came over her on seeing him, and knowing he had watched her. She felt glad to see him; the depression of loneliness left her when her glance fell on his figure. Just as he drew near she was struck by a passing wonder that he should look so sad—he, prosperous, strong, and with all going well in his affairs—but the thought was only momentary, for he was before her, raising his hat, and regarding her with grave, dark eyes. She put out her hand, smiling softly, and yet embarrassed with the same curious consciousness and shyness that

had been between them yesterday. She made an effort to throw it off.

"You look grave, Dr. Fane. Are you going to rebuke me for being so far from home?"

"I did not know I had authority to do so," he said, smiling in turn. "I fear Dr. Fullagher would resent my taking so much upon myself. I am glad to see you this morning. I hope the sad catastrophe yesterday, and the excitement consequent, have had no ill effects. Seriously, how are you to-day?"

"I felt tired this morning—very tired, and—" she was about to add depressed, so easy was it to tell him, but she checked the word. "But I am better now. Miss Jacques reminded me that I must expect ups and downs. And these children have done me good."

"The children?" he repeated, glancing at them.

"I have been watching them," she said, simply. "Don't they make a pretty picture?"

"A ready-made Birket Foster," he said, laughing. "Only their noise spoils the illusion."

"I liked that—what you call their noise—best." There was a touch of indignation in her tone.

Fane was charmed in a new way. "You showed wisdom, however, in keeping at this respectful distance."

Edith laughed. "I did not wish to disturb them. Do you know them, Dr. Fane?"

"I fancy they come from two cottages behind the trees there," he said, pointing to the further corner of the field. "I have just been to one of them. The small guardian of the party has an anxious air, as if she wished to make some inquiry. Would you like to see the pretty picture nearer?"

He bent towards her rather eagerly as he made the suggestion, a bright look in his eyes, almost of excitement, for it flashed into his mind that his motive must be as evident to her as to himself; she must divine his desire to prolong the moments in her presence. But she was quite unconscious of any meaning beyond mere courtesy in the question, and assented simply.

They walked across the grass accordingly. The children looked up in amazement at the approach of the lady and gentleman, and put their fingers into their mouths, as the safest guard against awkwardness under the trial. The eldest curtsied, and shyly asked the doctor how mother was.

"Better; much better," he answered cheerfully. Edith was already on her knees, with one arm round the chubby urchin of two, and was wooing him to kiss her. Fane drew back a step or two to get a better view of the group. It was a

picture, and a beautiful one, to him now. The country children, shy and rustic, round and rosy-cheeked, and the graceful lady in pale grey, with her delicate face, and tender smiles.

The eldest girl picked up her charge,—the baby,—and waited to present it for inspection, evidently anxious for a share of notice for her sister. Edith saw this in a moment, as she rose from her feet after caressing the sturdy toddler, and she took the baby into her own arms, praised it, to the sister's delight, and kissed the soft cheeks.

"Ask if they like pennies," said Fane, coming to her side, and stooping down, as though to notice the child too.

Edith raised her dark eyes to him. "I can't," she whispered. "I haven't any with me."

"Oh, I'll provide them. Shall I ask?"

"Please."

"Here, you small children," said Fane, straightening himself, and addressing the group.

"Do you like pennies?"

There was a grin expressive of keen appreciation of the remark.

"Do you know what to do with them?"

The grin broadened at the exquisite humour found in any doubt as to their knowledge on that head, and one small voice uttered an encouraging, "Rather."

Edith laughed outright, and glanced at Fane with eyes full of fun.

"You are to present them," he said.

"No, that is not fair."

"You must, indeed; I can't risk endangering my passage through this field."

Edith gave back the baby, and Fane dropped the coppers into her hand, keenly conscious of touching the ungloved fingers, and of the sweet, almost childlike, eagerness of her face as she received the largesse.

"It's lucky I have enough," he remarked. "I don't generally weight myself with copper."

Fortunately, there was just enough, and the children's delight was pretty to see.

"I don't think they will regret your disturbing them," said Fane, lightly, as they walked over the grass together. "You may rest content in having left them happier than you found them."

"Thanks to you, yes," said Edith. "I should not have thought of giving them pennies."

"Neither should I had you not been there," he said, somewhat drily. "Confess you thought them painfully incongruous?"

"Perhaps there was something of that feeling in my mind. I am glad they got them, though. They were so pleased."

"They will forsake the buttercups for the sweet shop," said Fane, who had thought of Edith's pleasure in giving, not of the children's in receiving. He was in rather a reckless humour. Seeing her in an everyday mood, and on an everyday level, after the heights of tragedy to which she had been raised, he was strongly tempted to enjoy the present, regardless of forbidding facts. Why should he not take the unutterable sweetness of this present meeting when his chances of seeing her were so rare, and would come to an end altogether in a short, a very short time?

He noticed that she looked pale and tired after the little excitement of the penny distribution, and he begged her to take his arm. She did so at once. The gate gave him a little trouble in settling back into its place; that done, he took her hand, and, as a matter of course, drew it again through his arm, making some trivial remark at the same time. The remark received no answer; he saw a quick change come into her face. A cart, which had been slowly passing while he secured the gate, was now in front, and lying in it, with a negligent hand upon the reins, was Mr. Nicholson. He was looking back at them with a curiously observant expression. Glancing up, Edith had met the look. There is

a disagreeable sensation in suddenly catching the eyes of a person who has had the advantage of two or three moments' first observation, and there was a sullen foxiness in Nicholson's regard which needed no outside aid to enhance its unpleasant effect.

Fane frowned fiercely at him. The greengrocer did not budge an inch, however, and the cart rumbled slowly down the lane.

Fane felt the hand on his arm tighten as Edith made a hasty movement, shrinking from the man's stare, and half-turning to her companion with a mournful, appealing look. In spite of his sorrow and anger at the unfortunate occurrence, his heart leapt at that involuntary appeal. But she drew away her hand, and leaned upon the gate a minute, keeping her face carefully averted.

Fane waited, dumb, fuming with rage against Nicholson, tender with regret for her.

When she moved she looked so white, weary, and spiritless, that his anger and pity were redoubled.

"You have done too much," he said.

"Oh no; but I must go in now."

He made her lean on him again, and conducted her gently to Miss Jacques's gate. There she stopped to say good-morning.

"Do you think Dr. Fullagher will write to Ucclesfield soon?" she said.

" I am sure he will if you wish it."

" Can you tell him I do wish it ?"

" Certainly. I will do anything I can," he said, earnestly.

" I must go as soon as possible," said Edith.

He thought of her health and looked dubious.

" Don't you see ?" she said, quickly. " I shall get stronger much sooner if I am in a new place, and at work."

" Yes. I understand." And they parted.

" Oh, I have written," said the doctor, when Fane repeated Miss Romney's message in short, precise terms—not urgently, but like a task. " Wrote by last evening's post. Can't keep a lady waiting. She's in a hurry to go, I suppose ?"

" You can't be surprised at that," was the curt rejoinder.

Dr. Fullagher glanced after his retreating figure, for Fane carried himself and his wretchedness into solitude as often as might be during these days, and pulled a rueful grimace. " It will be a good thing for you, my friend, when she has gone," he murmured, when alone. " You are not the same man you were when you came. By the Lord ! there never will be peace in this paradise of fools till the men are separated from the women." And the doctor lit a cigar to comfort himself under the existing dispensation.

Two or three days later came a reply from his Ucclesfield friend. He sent in for Fane.

"I've got Kennedy's letter—satisfactory and all that—promises to do his best for my candidate. Knew he would. Staunch old devil, Kennedy. I would take the letter to Miss Romney—I should like to see if it pleases her, and how she's going on, but I've no heart for anything with this confounded gout. No port to-day—oh, damn it!" as a twinge seized him. "Who would think I was to end as a martyr? Will you take the letter?"

"I am going that way," said Fane, slowly, hesitatingly. The tone belied the flash which had come into his eyes at the first suggestion of the commission.

"That's lucky. Of course I wish to give you no unnecessary trouble. But I should like her to know as soon as may be. Tell her Kennedy's interest secures the appointment. That will please her—unless she is as unreasonable as the rest of her sex—and see what her chances are of being able to go to Ucclesfield in a fortnight's time, as he proposes."

"A fortnight's time." Fane took the letter like a man in a dream, and went and shut himself up in his private room. Where was his earnest and remorseful wish that she might have

work and content restored to her?—not gone, certainly—as he had said, he would have given his life to put things right for her—but overshadowed and east into the background by the confused wretchedness of his grief and love. His unselfish sorrow for her was forgotten in the intolerable agony of the knowledge that he was about to lose her altogether out of his life.

Presently he sprang up, pulled the bell, and ordered the brougham round directly. He was sure, at least, of seeing her this once more, and he would go immediately. She ought to hear as soon as possible. Dr. Kennedy's reply would give her pleasure, he thought, with all unreasonable bitterness.

He drove to The Cottage first. Miss Jaques had gone to visit a sick woman and Edith was alone. A strong revival of all his prejudices against women doctoring visited Fane as he entered the cool, dainty little drawing-room, sweet with the scent of freshly gathered flowers. Edith sat at the table, painting a group of pansies, and as she rose from the pretty employment, flushing slightly at his unexpected appearance, and greeted him with serene grace, he thought with some anger of her discontent at the ornamental *rôle* ordinarily prescribed for women.

"I am sorry Miss Jaques is out," she said.

"My business is to you," said Fane. "I come on behalf of Dr. Fullagher."

And he explained and gave her the letter. His manner was that of an indifferent messenger. He did not say an unnecessary word, neither did he take the seat she indicated, but remained standing, as if he intended cutting the interview as short as his errand would allow.

Edith took the letter eagerly. "Thank you," she said, and read it at once. It was satisfactory and encouraging. The onlooker seemed to see hope revive her. Her eyes shone, her face brightened; she looked animated, eager, enthusiastic.

"Thank you," she repeated. "Will you please tell Dr. Fullagher I am very grateful to him?"

"He told me to tell you," said Fane, repeating the words like a lesson, "that he considered this secured the appointment."

She pushed away her sketch-book with an air of energy.

"That is satisfactory, is it not?" he said, coldly.

"Indeed it is!"

"And you are glad?"

She looked at him then—his voice sounded so constrained and unlike itself—and met the eyes which had rested on her without pause since she received the letter. They held hers strangely for full ten seconds.

“ You will go when he asks you ? ” said Fane, in the same unnatural, restrained voice.

“ I—I— ” she faltered, half-forgetting what they were talking about. “ If I am able,” she added, almost absently.

He came a step or two forward, gazing at her in the same fixed way ; he put out his hand in a blind, blundering fashion. “ Then I may never see you again,” he said, a break in his voice.

“ Dr. Fane ! ”

The utter surprise — neither angry nor reproachful—only sheer surprise, seemed to sting him.

“ Shall I tell you what that means to me ? ”

Edith drew back a step, and made a quick gesture of deprecation.

“ Let me,” said Fane, in a low, unsteady voice. “ It can do you no harm, and I must speak ; I cannot help myself.” He bent his head, and added simply, “ I love you.”

The colour dyed her face with painful, burning blushes—blushes that crave hiding ; but she drew herself up in the pride of insulted dignity.

“ Dr. Fane ! you forget,” she said.

“ I forget nothing,” he replied. “ It is my hour of madness ; I must tell you. Does it hurt you to be told I love you ? understand, I forget nothing. I am not making love. Why ! ” he

cried, with a burst of passion in strange contrast to his cold, quiet tones so far, "you are sacred to me; it is because of that—because you are just what you are—it is presumptuous to utter words of praise, that I can tell you. You are generous; you will understand. I have loved you since the first time I saw your face. Can you understand now what it was to see you as you were, unprosperous, unhappy, and to know that I was the chief cause? to see you cruelly insulted, and know that it was my fault? to see you at the gates of death, to feel sure that you would die; to see you now, weakened and 'cast out, and to know that you intend to risk a repetition of the same thing? While I—I have not even the right to tell you all this; thanks to my own arrogance and folly, honour forbids me the poor relief of pouring out my mad feelings for you. Oh, you are avenged; you are cruelly avenged!" he exclaimed, passionately.

Edith was trembling from head to foot; but she faced him, undaunted, and her eyes did not fall before his, glowing and excited as his were.

"Do you think it gives me any gratification to know that?" she said, coldly, and with a suspicion of scorn in her tone.

"I have no ungenerous thought about you," he said.

At that she turned away her head quickly, and her lips quivered. She could not speak directly.

"Forgive me," she said, earnestly. "I should not have said that. What you have said has startled and—and pained me."

"Pained you?" with a quick movement, as if he would have gone to her.

"How can it be otherwise?" very gently. "Only one woman has a right to hear such words from you."

"Oh yes, I know," said he, with a wretched laugh. "There is nothing left out in the misery of my position!"

Edith, who had grown very white, flushed vividly. Her eyes flashed indignation upon him.

"Dr. Fane!" she exclaimed. "Oh hush, hush!"

He looked at her; looked at her with all his love, passionate, adoring, hopeless, in his eyes; looked as if he could not take his eyes away, and then made a blind movement to take up his hat.

"I had better go, I am forgetting myself."

The broken-down way in which this was said destroyed her anger at a breath. She took a quick step nearer to him, and her face was wistful with intense regret.

"I am very sorry; I cannot tell you how sorry I am that this has happened," she said, earnestly.

"We must both forget it as quickly as possible. I shall go away soon, and then you will forget this—this madness, and no harm will be done. It is surely a mistake," she faltered, tears coming into her eyes. "You were—sorry for me."

"You do not need my sorrow," said he, drearily; and added, with a sharp-drawn breath, "it is no mistake."

"I am very sorry," was all she could say.

There was a pause. There seemed nothing else to be said.

Fane moved slowly towards the glass door, like a man unconscious of surroundings. "I will go," he said, dreamily.

"The letter, you will take the doctoor's letter." She picked it up from the table and held it towards him. As he took it their eyes met; hers, wet with tears, and full of regret and sorrow; his, confused and miserable. The tears fell: Edith's lips moved to say some word of kind farewell, but no voice would come, and her eyes fell under the longing, despairing intensity of his gaze. She turned abruptly from him.

Fane waited a moment, gathering his faculties together.

"Don't trouble about it," he said, in the same odd, dreamy fashion. "I can't tell a lie and say I shall get over it, for I know that is impossible.

But I'm hard and tough enough. Forgive me; I should have remembered you are not strong enough to be teased. I am wounded, and I've cried out as we men do; but, if it will be any comfort to you, I shall not break any promise I made before I knew you; I have some sense of honour left."

"Thank you; I am glad I shall do no further mischief." She spoke almost gratefully.

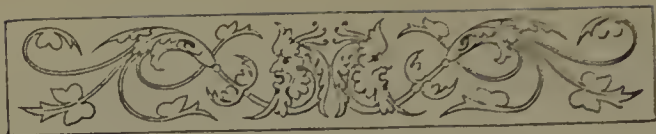
"And you will forgive me?"

She repeated the words as if not understanding, and then said hastily and agitatedly, "Oh yes, yes! there is nothing to forgive."

"God bless you," said Fane. "Ah, God bless you!" he repeated, an imploring anguish in his tone, and with no other word of leave-taking he went away.

Edith stood motionless with her hands clasped upon the table. She heard his footsteps on the gravel and listened to each; when they grew faint she wheeled round, and looked through the open doorway. He was at the gate; she caught a glimpse of his pale and haggard face as he stooped to secure it; then he was gone.

She sank upon the couch, and hid her face in the cushions.



CHAPTER XII.

“IT IS TRUE.”

“Was it wrong to own,
Being truth?
Why should all the giving prove
His alone?”—BROWNING.

TEN minutes after she was roused by the cheerful sound of voices, and had only time to lift up her bowed head, and attempt to get her features into some sort of order, before Mrs. Jack Chutterworth, followed by Miss Jacques and Winifred, approached the glass door.

“Your flowers do twice as well as ours. I think I should like to live in a cottage like this,” lisped Mona. “Where is the invalid? Oh, Miss Romney, here you are!” and Mona greeted her in her least extravagant manner, and sank into the nearest chair. Mona had discarded the artistic style of costume, and was developing fast into a fine lady. She dressed extravagantly in the height of fashion. She had also adopted

some little airs and affectations which she appeared to think belonged to her last *rôle*. On this occasion she carried a tiny Maltese dog, and it soon came out that she had left two favourite pugs in the carriage. Winifred regretfully fancied that her friend was deteriorating.

"We have come to take you for a drive," said Mrs. Chutterworth.

"I don't care to go out this morning, thank you," replied Edith.

"Gracious! and you are a doctor! I thought doctors must know what was good for them."

"Have you never heard of preachers preaching what they don't practise?" demanded Miss Jacques, as she untied her bonnet-strings, and threw them back.

"That's what most of them do, isn't it?" Mona said, with a guileless air.

"I don't think you look well this morning, Aunt Edith," observed Winifred, anxiously.

"No. Miss Romney is certainly paler than she was when we were here yesterday," put in Mona.

"The weather is oppressive," said Miss Jacques.

"We met Dr. Fane's carriage in the lane. Does he still continue his professional visits? He didn't see us. I leaned forward on purpose

to shed the light of my countenance upon him ; but he was like the messenger in Humpty Dumpty's poetry—very stiff and proud. He never raised his eyes. You know he's quite in my good graces now," chattered Mona, languidly fanning herself with one of Miss Jacques's Japanese fans—"ever since I heard that he had knocked down that wretch of a Nicholson. My ideal of a man is one who can knock another down. I told Jack so, and the poor fellow was obliged to confess he had done nothing in that way to earn my admiration. He has not 'drunk delight of battle with his peers.' However, he promised to look out for an opportunity of distinguishing himself, so I live in constant dread of seeing him brought home with horrible scars, or black eyes, or something of that sort—for he is sure to get the worst of an encounter. He needs looking after," added the young matron, fanning herself with a gentle sigh.

"It must be a comfort to both you and him to know that he has someone so well qualified to do the looking after," said Miss Jacques.

"Well, he doesn't express his satisfaction in those terms," drawled Mona. "But, seriously, Miss Romney, are you not out of the doctor's hands yet?"

“Oh yes, weeks ago! Dr. Fane called to bring me a letter from Dr. Fullagher.”

Mona opened her sleepy eyes in exaggerated astonishment. “A letter—from Dr. Fullagher? Can these things be? I thought the old ogre would rather dine on cold veal than write to a lady.”

“And I have no doubt his lady acquaintances are more than willing he should,” said Miss Jacques, brusquely. “No one cares for abuse in writing. A letter from Dr. Fullagher would be explosive.”

“Was yours, Miss Romney?” asked Mona, the curious.

“No; but then it was not written by the doctor,” said Edith, forcing a smile. Mona’s chatter had been welcome to her; it gave her time and opportunity to gather her faculties together. She explained about the letter.

“A fortnight? Oh, that’s sudden!” exclaimed Mona.

Winifred was looking gravely out into the garden. Now she turned to Edith, smoothing away the slight contraction between her brows, and making an attempt to speak cheerfully. “Oh, I’m so glad, Aunt Edith.”

Edith squeezed her hand. Strange to say, the importance of this satisfactory promise had

lessened considerably since first hearing of it. It was an effort to realise the distinct cause for congratulation.

"Speaking disinterestedly, so am I," said Miss Jacques. "And I forgive the doctor his atrocious treatment of Tom."

"What was that?" put in Mona.

"He frightened the poor, dear;" and in spite of her forgiveness, the tone was severe. "But I forgive the doctor now, as he has done you such prompt and efficient service, my dear. Only I can't help regretting the abrupt stop it puts to your time of convalescence."

"Oh, that is over! I am quite well and strong again," said Edith, rising with a little spurt of energy, as if inaction had suddenly become oppressive. "There will be a great deal to do; I must waste no more time. If you will allow me to change my mind, Mrs. Chutterworth, I will ask you to drive me to Princess Road. I should like to look through the house, and decide what furniture will be needed."

"You won't take Winifred with you, Miss Romney?"

Edith looked doubtfully at her niece. "There is no need for her to go until I am settled," she said.

"Of course not!" cried Mona, triumphantly.

“But I shall do the settling part,” said Winifred, smiling; “that is, Sarah and I will do it between us. It’s not to be supposed that you are to be troubled about domestic affairs, and all the fiddle-faddle of arrangements when you will have the hospital on your hands, Aunt Edith.”

“Quite right, Miss Noel.” Miss Jacques spoke approvingly.

Edith went to dress for the drive, and Mona asked permission to go up-stairs with her, in order to arrange her hat. She did survey herself with attention in the glass, turning and twisting to get as many points of view as possible of her charming summer costume; and gave, too, some touches to the fluffy hair over her brow; but the hat was only a pretext, as she frankly averred.

“How do you like this costume?” she asked, with all the earnestness demanded by the subject.

“I think it is exceedingly pretty,” said Edith.

“Well, I think it is. Jack says it’s lovely. I gave up the æsthetic style to please him, you know. He always says he can’t admire a dress unless he knows the colour; and really, these bright, delicate, pure colours are much prettier and truer to nature than those dingy artistic tints. Look at the sky, and flowers, and humming-birds,” said Mona, in a tone which strongly

reminded Edith of Mr. Milward. "But I didn't come up-stairs to talk about dress," she went on, taking a last survey before leaving the glass and seating herself. "I wanted to tell you—Winifred has the ball at her feet now. *Her* turn has come."

"What ball?" asked Edith, puzzled.

"The Ardley ball, of course. That is why I wish she would stay a week or two longer with me; I believe the thing would be done then."

"I am not sure whether that result is a desirable one," said Edith, with cold reserve.

"Oh, Miss Romney, if they care for each other! Of course, he behaved rather badly; he had no right to flirt with Miss Fane after he had paid marked attentions to Winifred. I make no excuses for him, pray believe me; but if a man is sorry, and shows it?"

Edith smiled a little sceptically. Her heart was very sore against Oscar Ardley.

"But he does; indeed he does! I was quite angry with him too, at first!" exclaimed Mona. "I really could not speak peaceably to him for weeks; but I see now that he regrets what he did. He has seen Winifred several times, and he behaves beautifully—just as he ought to behave. I must confess that I have given him opportunities; I hope you do not mind?"

“My dear Mrs. Chutterworth, how can I do so?”

“I should not like to think it displeased you. It is this way, you see. We have always someone at our house, and so it makes it easy for Mr. Ardley to come too. My sisters-in-law are awfully affectionate just now. They meet the curate and a friend of Jack’s oftener at our place than at home. Mr. Chutterworth doesn’t take kindly to either of the young men, so the poor dear girls are enjoying the pungency of the paternal disapproval in their little love affairs, and they come to our house in order to hearten themselves with glimpses of the despised swains. Really,” said Mona, laughing, “I am growing quite a match-maker, and it is a most thankless office. Jack and I are sometimes nearly reduced to entertaining ourselves at a distant table with our own albums like the couple in *Punch*. I think Winifred looks better—perhaps when he hears she is leaving Wanningster so soon he may be startled into action.” Mona mused over this idea.

“I am sure,” said Edith, gently, “you will do nothing to precipitate matters. Affairs of this delicate nature are best left unguided by a third person.”

Mona coloured slightly. Her active brain had

in truth been busy in devising how Winifred's departure could be made to hasten Oscar's movements ; to surprise him into a declaration. The objection conveyed in Edith's words against any management being used in the affair was too significant to be ignored.

"Yes, you are right," said Mona, at once. "I won't interfere. Indeed," she added, mischievously, as she rose in obedience to Edith's sign that she was ready, "I don't think any interference will be necessary."

They drove into town. Mrs. Jack Chutterworth dropped her friends at No. 20, having arranged to return or send the carriage for them at the end of an hour.

This revisiting of the familiar rooms was a curious experience to both Edith and Winifred. Neither would acknowledge even to herself the degree of effort put into this first start of active preparation for leaving Wanningster. They went through all the rooms, making suggestions, planning the packing, and talking cheerfully and energetically. But Winifred's cheerfulness was assumed—assumed instinctively as an armour of pride to cover the dull aching of her heart : and Edith perceived with some surprise and dismay how little spring there was in the relief of going to a new place and beginning again. She

entered the locked-up consulting-room, and her breast expanded with pleasure at the thought of so soon returning to the old duties and studies; yet even that pleasure was not so eager and spontaneous as she had fancied it would be—as it ought to be. A faint shadow of those black hours of depression, of weakness, and morbidness fell upon her, as she glanced round the quiet room. The scrupulous order of everything in it seemed a protest against the disturbance of use. "Remember how you have suffered" seemed breathed from the very walls. Edith did remember; and she went out softly as from a chamber of death.

"I shall be glad to get away," she said, more to herself than to Winifred, as they left the house. There was not much gladness or relief in her tone, however.

The plunge into action was made, and Edith went into town again next day. She refused to shirk the superintendence of any arrangements, although both Winifred and Sarah—who had returned from her holiday—were anxious to take all trouble off her hands. Edith would not spare herself, and all the less because of the temptation it was to let others do all for her. She was dismayed at her uninterested state of mind, as regarded the impending change; dismayed

because the future had no power to attract her, and almost ashamed at the effort it was to prepare for it. She would not yield to this strange inertia. She threw herself into the business of making plans and settling her affairs with serious zeal. When once she was in a new place, amongst new faces, and, above all, with work to do, she would feel herself again. She tried to forget the disturbing, perplexing influence at work upon her in the press of occupation; she tried to rid herself of the uneasy restlessness which possessed her—deeper into her feelings she dared not go. An instinct warned her that to save her peace of mind she must not enquire too curiously into the cause and nature of that constant aching at her heart—that safety lay in refusing, as far as it was possible, to recognise its existence. Had she been a thought less true and candid, she might have attempted to believe that her disturbed feelings were simply pity for another's pain: but, though her pity and regret were great, she was too honest for the slightest self-deception. She wished to forget Fane's confession. It should not have been made; it had been made only because he was completely overwrought; when he came to himself he would repent his outbreak. It was only just to him to drive it

out of her mind as fast as possible. In spite of her efforts, however, in the midst of all the practical details involved in moving from one town to another, she was haunted by his words and by his face. The passion in his wretched eyes, the agitation of his broken words, swayed her as much again in remembrance as they had done at the time,—then, her faculties had been concentrated in the endeavour to meet his weakness and vehemence with strength and coolness—and she had succeeded, yes, she could say that, she thought with some bitterness, and certainly no triumph. But when a phrase occurred to her memory—and it would at all unseasonable times and places—she heard the very tone in which he had spoken it, she saw the very look of his face, and a curious weakness came over her, a sweet, strange agitation thrilled her.

Why did she not feel the full strangeness of what he had confessed? why had she not been overwhelmed by amazement at the fact of his passionate love? When these questions beset her, she covered her face, and blushed hotly behind the sheltering fingers.

And she would throw herself feverishly into business, feeling that the only desirable thing was that she should be out of Wanningster.

Innocently, she had done mischief; a mischief which might have been disastrous, but which she had faith to believe would be remedied in time. He had said distinctly he would keep his promise to his betrothed; and time would subdue his forbidden love. Fortunately, there was little or no danger of his seeing her again. She regarded their last interview as a farewell, and so, she was sure, did he.

Only three days after, however, on returning from a long morning spent in town, she found the small household at The Cottage in some disturbance. Miss Jacques, who looked her briskest in any emergency, explained that Bill had hurt his foot badly, and added, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that she had taken him in, it being out of the question for him to get to his mother's, who lived nearly a quarter of a mile away.

"Besides, she is what north-country people call 'feckless,' and would nurse him abominably."

"What sort of hurt is it?" asked Edith, on her way to the door. "And where is he? I had better go to him at once."

But Miss Jacques peremptorily declared she should do nothing of the kind. It was in vain Edith protested she was well now.

"I hope so," said Miss Jacques. "But after

an illness like yours your nerves are not in a fit state for dressing an unsightly wound. "No, my dear, I must do as I think right in this matter."

"I must make a beginning," said Edith. "I shall probably have to dress quite as unsightly wounds as soon as I am appointed to the hospital."

"That is all the more reason you should risk getting no distaste by beginning a moment sooner than is necessary. My dear, you are too sensible not to understand my objections."

"But they are unnecessary!—pray be reasonable, dear Miss Jacques! The poor boy is suffering—let me see to him at once."

"He is being seen to. I sent for Dr. Fane directly it happened."

"Dr. Fane!" The bright colour swept across the delicate, earnest face.

For a moment Miss Jacques feared she had offended her friend. "Edith!" she exclaimed, half-entreatingly, and half-impatiently too. "You know me well enough not to mistake my meaning?"

Edith glanced in surprise. "Of course I understand. But I am quite well enough," she added, with a catch in her breath. She turned to the window, startled and agitated.

The news that he was at that moment in the house made her heart beat fast. She was almost overwhelmed by the rush of emotions which came over her; what terrible thing did they all mean?—the agitation, the sharp pain, the sharper sweetness, anger and shame? For a moment it seemed as though she was carried off her feet; then she came to herself with a start. It would be better for him not to see her; he should be spared as much as possible. She turned from the window again, took up her sunshade, and made a step towards the door. It was opened at the same moment from the other side, and the next moment Fane entered the room, and stood before her.

“Here is Miss Romney quite disturbed because I persist in regarding her as a convalescent still, and have called you in, Dr. Fane!” exclaimed Miss Jacques. “One can but do what one thinks is for the best. Come and support me.”

Edith hardly heard the words, so conscious was she that her hand was in his for half a second.

“I think you are quite right,” said Fane, gravely, and with some constraint. “The case would not make a desirable re-beginning.” He carefully avoided looking at Edith as he

spoke, and she as carefully avoided looking at him. She moved a step or two nearer the window.

"I suppose I must give in to such excessive care-taking," she said, making an effort to speak indifferently. "I must content myself with helping to nurse."

"Nonsense!" cried Miss Jaques. "You have a perfectly morbid desire for work! Haven't you enough business on your hands at present? No, no; if there's nursing to be done, that's my sphere. Hannah and I could manage half-a-dozen Bills."

"Then, if I am to be left out entirely, I will go and take off my things," said Edith, smiling. She cast a slight glance at Fane, bent her head, and with a formal "good morning" left the room.

Fane attended regularly at The Cottage for the next week. It was, of course, impossible to reckon upon the times of his calls, as they of necessity varied a great deal, but Edith contrived to avoid seeing him by making her visits to the town extend over those hours when it was probable he might call.

On the seventh day, however, he was much later than usual. Edith had returned from Wanningster, and was in the drawing-room,

taking off her gloves, when he was ushered in. Fane was better prepared than she was, for he was tormented each time by the possible chance of meeting her; but still his composure was tried by seeing her quite alone, while Edith started, and turned red, and then white.

They forgot the ordinary greetings. They paused, she at the table, with one ungloved hand resting upon it, and he a step or two within the room where he had been arrested at sight of her, and looked at each other. Edith averted her face suddenly, struck by a fear as to what expression might be found in her eyes. Her composure had forsaken her, and it seemed impossible to win it back. She took up her gloves, she let them fall again: she opened her lips to speak, and they moved soundlessly, and then sound came as it were with a jerk, and her voice was strange and hard.

“Miss Jacques is out.”

“It is not necessary for me to wait and see her,” said Fane, speaking also with difficulty. He hesitated a moment, and then added: “I will go up-stairs at once.” He went to the door, he put his hand upon the handle: again he hesitated, and finally let the lock shoot back into his place with a sharp elick, as he abruptly turned towards Edith.

"Is the date of your departure really fixed for next week?" asked he, a hard brusqueness in his tone.

"Yes; we go on Wednesday." Her voice sounded cool and indifferent. She took a step nearer the window.

"So I heard. Then I had better say good-bye while I have the chance—most probably I shall not see you when I come down again," with dry bitterness.

She said nothing. He could not see her face, for she stood almost with her back to him.

He was maddened with his intolerable misery; he felt a cruel wish to sting her, to force her to utter a word of deprecation, of agitation, even of reproach—she, who was so exempt from the tumult of wretchedness he was enduring.

"Your avoidance of me for the past week has proved that you have not after all forgiven what I did ten days ago."

A faint, incoherent exclamation reached his ears.

"Why would you not let me see you?" he said, in harsh, vibrating tones. "Could you not trust me? were you afraid I should persecute you?"

"No!" quickly.

"Did I not tell you that you were sacred to me? It would not have hurt you to let me see your face. You are going away, and I may never meet you again, and—and—you cannot imagine how I grudged losing those few glimpses—" his voice failed him, and he paused. As he gazed at the graceful figure, motionless, and averted from him, he realised with poignant anguish his full calamity and loss. His conflict of despair and passion was beyond the power of speech.

Then he noticed her silence, and it startled him. Had his wild, forbidden words offended her deeply?—had they made her take back her first forgiveness? She *must* forgive him afresh; he could not have her go away in anger against him.

He crossed over to her. "Miss Romney," he said, humbly, and then he could see her face.

The tears were falling fast—tears she had not dared to wipe away, because the gesture would have betrayed her. On being discovered, her first impulse was to shrink back and hide her face, but she stood firm, and looked at him instead with sad, proud eyes. His met them, and he knew that she loved him.

“Edith!” broke from him in a low exclamation, as he recognised the fact with something like awe.

She brushed away her tears, and looked at him with a faint, bright smile, which showed very little of shy consciousness or shame.

“Yes,” she said, simply, “I could not help it; but, after all, why should you not know? I think you have a right to know. You will know now that I understand, and am sorry, and—and your life will not be all unhappy. Yes, I had no right to keep back the truth from you—it is yours.”

He did not understand; he hardly heard this.

“Can it be true?” he asked, in the same subdued and reverent way. “Say it in words—tell me I am not dreaming!”

“It is true,” she answered, with earnest sweetness and serenity.

As the soft confession ended, the garden gate clicked, and Miss Jacques’s voice was heard affectionately greeting Tom, who sleepily roused himself from a doze in the sunshine to accompany his mistress down the walk.

The clear shrill “Tom, dear old Tom, poor old Tom, then,” broke the spell upon the lovers.

Edith started. "I will go. Good-bye," putting out her hand.

He seized it and was going to say something, but she dragged it from his grasp and hurriedly left the room.





CHAPTER XIII.

PARTING.

“Full sad and sorrowfull was Britomart
. . . Yet wisely moderated her own smart,
Seeing his honor, which she tendred chiefe.”

SPENSER.

“Now we must part.
I think we had the chief of all love’s joys
Only in knowing that we loved each other.”

GEORGE ELIOT.

SHE took refuge in her bedroom and let the tears have way. Tears were a very rare luxury indeed with Edith, and generally exhausting, not relieving; but on this occasion they came freely and did her good. It was some time before her confusion and agitation subsided, before she could look back to the last ten minutes in the drawing-room with any degree of calmness and coherency in her thoughts. At first her heart seemed overcharged by the strength and tenderness of her feelings towards her lover. With an elevation of passionate emotion she told herself

that at least they were equal. She had not denied him the knowledge that his love was returned; the knowledge of his love had been exquisite to her as soon as she knew her own feelings towards him, and it seemed that he must have at least half his trouble lightened by the fact that the woman he loved returned his love. Could anything be better than to know that the person one loves returns that love? — could anything be sweeter, or give purer pleasure? So she thought, in the exaltation of her own deep feeling. She was glad, in spite of all, that he had learned her secret; glad he had this comfort. He could not be utterly wretched, knowing this.

She bathed her eyes and went down when summoned to tea.

Miss Jacques looked at her keenly, curiously. "So it seems Dr. Fane had not even seen his patient when I returned," she observed.

"No. He had not yet been up-stairs."

"And he did not go after," said Miss Jacques. "It must have been a case of mental aberration. He rushed off at once."

"He did not see Bill?"

"He did not. I asked whether he admired Tom's new collar, and he laughed as if I had proposed some amusing conundrum, and hurried

off. He looked another man to the one I have seen lately."

Edith smiled as absently as Fane had laughed, a lovely rose-bloom on her face.

Miss Jacques's shrewd eyes took all in. She went quickly through the process of putting two and two together, and the result, as she made it, gratified her extremely.

He was glad then? thought Edith, using the childish phrase with a warm glow at her heart. She put aside every lingering feeling of shame at her self-betrayal when she was assured of that.

There was a dreamy quietness about her that evening, all the more noticeable after the suppressed restlessness and excitement of her manner lately.

"What is it?" thought Miss Jacques, beginning to feel less certain, and slightly puzzled. "If anything is settled, why does she not tell me?"

A little later they sat in the drawing-room with the curtains drawn, and the lamp lit. Miss Jacques knitted, and Edith lay back in a low rocking-chair, with idle hands upon her lap, swaying to and fro in languid motion. Her pale, thoughtful face wore a restful expression. The talk was fitful, and presently a long, silent pause ensued.

Miss Jacques was thinking that, after three

more evenings, she would be again alone, living the old monotonous life; thinking, too, that as the weeks passed her sufferings would increase, and perhaps, in only a few months, bring the end. Her hands with the knitting dropped on her knees. She glanced round her room, and a sense of the dreariness of a lonely death oppressed her. She seemed to see the evenings and nights come to her one after another, bringing only pain and increasing weakness, and a sense of horror—physical horror. She did not think she was afraid to die; it was the desolation of loneliness, the palpable approaches of the end, which stifled her and caused this shrinking dread, like a chill shadow from the valley of death. Her roaming eyes fell on her friend. The good face, the calm eyes and steadfast lips, the confidence of ability and power which Edith brought to her work, had a wonderful charm for the delicate, excitable woman. Her presence gave Miss Jacques a feeling of support. With Edith watching by her, with her hand held in the other's firm encouraging clasp, Miss Jacques felt that the mists and shadows would disappear; that she would be enabled to await death without dread. An eager look came into her dilated eyes, she leaned forward and was opening her lips with a request, when Edith suddenly started,

and uttered an ejaculation of dismay. She rose in haste, came to the table, and opened her writing-case.

"Miss Jacques, can I get a note sent into town this evening?" she asked, looking across with a pale face, and dark startled eyes.

"Have you forgotten something?" said Miss Jacques, taking up her knitting. The shadows vanished. She returned to every-day life in a moment, quite ready to be practical.

"No; but I fear—I want to write to Dr. Fane; I fear he went away mistaken this afternoon."

"He looked like a man in a happy dream, who hardly understands a piece of good fortune that has befallen him."

The distress deepened on Edith's face. "Ah!" she murmured, her lips trembling. "Oh, I must write to him at once! I am so afraid he will—he may—he may do something rash."

"You seem disturbed at the idea of his being glad," said Miss Jacques, bluntly. "I never suspected you of being hard-hearted before. He has shown a sad enough face lately, I am sure."

"May I tell you—will you help me?" asked Edith, after a moment's pause.

"If you would like to tell me, do so, but I can't pledge myself to help you; your way may not be the way I should like you to take."

“But if it is right?”

“Ah, my dear, which of us can decide that? Right is capable of grievous distortion. If two people care for each other—and I guess that is what you would tell me—and no law stands between them, what is to prevent their happiness? There, I have pained you. You would remind me that he is promised to another woman, and that a man's honour should sacrifice his love and happiness; and so it should if he alone is to suffer. After all, ought it?” She pulled herself up doubtfully. “Is a man bound to marry a woman he has ceased to care for? If he is miserable in his marriage, *she* stands a poor chance of being anything else. The fact of sacrifice would come out sooner or later; a man cannot be generous to the extent of a prolonged deception—he is impatient by nature and training. But that is not the question, and we need not trouble about it. There can be *no* doubt, when it is a question of the happiness of two against one.”

“Miss Jacques!”

“My dear, you must let me say my say. The subject is important. I will not let you throw away your happiness if I can help it. There has been a great deal of nonsense talked about sacrifice, but I say boldly that both nature

and common sense are against one person sacrificing himself for another. It rarely—I won't say never—but it very rarely answers. The juxtaposition of people is constantly changing, and if people went free time and change would heal all wounds. Would you like a man to make a life sacrifice to save you the pain of being jilted?"

"Of course not."

"Would you feel grateful to the woman who urged it upon him? Can you imagine what your humiliation would be when you found out the little plan made for your happiness?"

"She will never find out," exclaimed Edith, warmly. "He is too generous."

"He would do his best to hide it from her, I can quite believe that; but it would need a saint's generosity to outlast the constant association and the wear and tear of married life. Think what a frightful demand the every-days of common life would make upon his generosity, his forbearance, his powers of acting a lie."

Edith listened with her eyes shaded by her hand. When Miss Jacques paused she said nothing.

"Even if it were possible for a man to carry pretence into all the minutiae of daily life, I question anyone's right to expect or even ask so

much from him. You inflict far more misery upon one, not to say two, than is saved by sparing a girl the mortification of a disappointment—”

“Mortification?—she loves him!”

“Well, then, she would choose his happiness first,” said Miss Jacques, stoutly. “What woman with any pride at all could marry a man who was in love with another?”

“She shall never know—she will be happy,” said Edith, in a low, hurried voice. “Honour comes first. Do you think *I* should be happy, even content, to know I had taken him from her?”

“You have done so already,” was the blunt reply.

“No one shall say that,” said Edith in hurt anger.

“That is pride,” Miss Jacques remarked.

“Pride? I think it is honesty! I should feel as if I had robbed Miss Lorimer.”

“Oh, my dear!” exclaimed the old lady, in the tone of one who gave up in despair.

“I wish you would understand,” said Edith, wistfully.

“I do, perfectly. Still understanding a thing doesn’t of necessity imply approval.” Her tone was dry.

“I can only say what you said to me when

you refused to let me attend Bill—one can only do what one thinks is the best.” She took up her pen. The troubled expression, still a little hurt, of the bent face touched her friend.

“At least, we need not quarrel,” she said, in her most affectionate way. “I have done my best to do so, and I own it with shame. You must be happy in your own way—I see you could not be so if you thought your happiness meant another’s loss. No doubt there is something finer even than happiness, and something almost as rare,” she added, below her breath.

“I could not quarrel with you,” said Edith, lovingly. “Will you tell me how I am to get a note taken into town this evening? I intend asking him to come and see me to-morrow. I shall not rest until I know he has not made a mistake.”

Miss Jacques mused. “It’s a pity Bill is invalided—I see, however. I will drive into town earlier than usual to-morrow, and leave it on my way to church. He won’t start till late on a Sunday. That will do.”

“Thank you,” said Edith, gratefully. And then she wrote :

“Will you come and see me to-morrow morning? I have something to say to you.

“EDITH ROMNEY.”

She gave the tiny note to her friend. She had done what she could to prevent any misunderstanding, and must wait for the morrow to learn whether or no she was in time. Her state of peaceful restfulness after fatiguing emotion had been suddenly changed to the fear of an unexpected possibility. Miss Jacques's remarks about the gladness of Fane's look had filled her with a soft, sweet delight at first; but as she sat rocking to and fro in dreamy musings, it flashed into her mind that his gladness might proceed from a less simple cause than her own—the mere fact of their love would perhaps not suffice him. It was this idea which struck her sharply and forcibly, and startled her into writing that note. He was impulsive; he might fancy that the knowledge he had gained to-day should make some practical difference in their lives. It required all her self-control to enable her to sit out quietly and in outward calm the remainder of that evening.

Her night was disturbed. She rose early, and spent the time of waiting in wandering about the garden. It seemed long before the little household was astir, and before Miss Jacques appeared in black silk and lace cap, her worn, delicate face not quite as placid as it generally was on Sunday morning.

She kissed Edith, and, holding her by the arms, looked up searchingly into her face.

"You still wish me to take the note?" said she.

"Oh yes—yes!"

"Well, well, I will. I might have known," said the old lady.

She started directly after breakfast, driven by the youth who acted as Bill's substitute. Edith went out into the lane to see her friend set off, and when the tiny equipage had rattled out of sight, she took her way into the field opposite.

How long would it be before he came? He might be out at an important case; there was no reckoning upon a doctor's movements—certainly there was little use in calculating the probable time of his arrival. She felt calmer now, however, for he would do nothing in regard to his engagement after receiving her note before seeing her. She sat on the grass where it sloped highest, alone between the soft blue of the sky and the gold and green of the field. The air was warm and summer-scented, full of the peace and hush of the country on Sunday. No voices of children broke its stillness; but soon from the town below came the mellowed sacred sound of church bells. Edith's heart was soothed and quieted. She had not doubted that her love must not find its "earthly close;" it had never

entered her head for a moment that her love would influence her outward life; but Miss Jacques's frank remarks the evening before had saddened and disturbed her. It was hard—he knew it was hard upon Fane by the breaking pity she felt for him—but what help was there?—what other course lay before them? What happiness worth the name of happiness could be won in honour's despite?—*that* happiness of all life's goods should have no suspicion of a stain upon it.

The church bells ceased. She rose and walked slowly homewards. If he had been disengaged when Miss Jacques left the note he might reach The Cottage any moment now. And as she crossed the lane, she saw him about fifty yards off coming quickly towards the gate. She stopped short in the middle of the lane, startled and dismayed at the ruthless sweeping away of her exaltation of mood by the sight of that tall, strong man's figure coming rapidly towards her—at the sudden commotion of revolt against the necessity for renunciation. Her heart leapt to him, and throbbed with overwhelming, subduing feeling; a moment's fear of the force and passion of his came over her—a moment's helpless wish to escape. She even glanced round instinctively as if escape were possible.

Both her hands were seized in a warm, firm clasp, and she heard a low murmur of her name. She raised her eyes to the face bent a little over hers, and met his gaze, ardent, anxious, appealing. They looked at each other, conscious only of that great feeling between them. Edith moved first. She caught her breath, her eyes fell, and she gently disengaged her hands. His presence had brought an unthought-of difficulty to her. All at once it occurred to her that she could not do what she had intended doing; how was it possible? He had made no proposal to her—how was she to assume that he would make one?—that his sense of honour was less scrupulous than her own? She had acted on the impulse of a sudden fear, and now womanly reserve perceived the awkwardness of the situation into which her frank disregard of the forms of conventionality had hurried her; at his first word, however, she knew that her fear was justified.

"Your note startled me," he said hurriedly. "I seemed to read disappointment between the lines. Was it to tell me that I was too presumptuous yesterday?"

"No," she said.

"Then I am contented," said Fane, but the anxious searching of her face belied his words.

Edith turned. "Let us go into the field,"

she said. "What was that?" she added hastily, giving a nervous glance round. A sudden rustling of the hedge and bushes in the wide ditch on the nearer side of the meadow gate had startled her. It was caused by Nicholson, who had been watching them from the ditch, and, having craned forward rather too far in his eagerness, was unable to draw back quickly and softly enough on their unexpectedly turning that way. He wore a surprised, discomfited air on being discovered, and scrambled out into the road. He gave a sullen touch of the hat to Fane, and shuffled on away from the town.

"He has not forgiven me yet," said Fane, with a careless laugh.

"Why does he come here so much?" asked Edith.

"Have you seen him again?"

"Two or three times. If I were superstitious I should think he cast an evil eye upon me."

Fane looked after the greengrocer's shambling figure with an angry, threatening gesture.

"I should like to knock him down for his impudence!" he exclaimed, taking an impetuous step forward.

Edith laid a frightened hand on his arm.

"Don't! oh don't! He does no harm—how can he? Probably he takes only a vulgar

curiosity in watching the place because I brought him into trouble."

"The trouble was his own seeking. I must stop it in some way," said Fane, decidedly, as he held the gate open for her to pass through. "It is atrocious that he should dare to annoy you in this way. The mere sight of his ugly face is enough to upset anyone's nerves."

"What does it matter?" she said. "I am going away on Wednesday."

Fane uttered an exclamation. "You will give up that hateful plan now?" he cried, almost imperiously.

Edith walked on a few steps in silence. Here was the opening for the understanding they must come to; she perceived it with a throb at her heart, and a deep sense of the difficulty of the task before her, caused by his evident unconsciousness of the necessity for parting.

Fane repeated his question quietly, appealingly.

"I must keep my promise," said Edith, very gently.

"There is no need for it at all!" he exclaimed. "Let them find some one else. It is hateful that you should do such work."

"Ah! don't say so!" she pleaded. "It is my work, remember."

He set his teeth on his lip. He dared not trust himself to go further into that subject—he hated and grudged that she should toil in this peculiar way; but that was not the pressing matter just then. “But it is different, now. There is no need for you to do any work.”

“But—indeed! there is just the same need,” she said. They had gone a little way across the field, and now they stopped, as if by one consent. Edith looked down sorrowfully at the buttercup in her fingers. Fane searched her pale, steadfast face, the haggard, restless look coming back into his eyes. He spoke, and he was very pale, and his lips trembled.

“Ah!” he said, “we must understand each other. I dare not think what this means. Yesterday I was happy. I had found out that you loved me. I was like a man who is given freedom in exchange for bondage. Your love made me free; your love makes you mine!” He tried to take her hand.

“Oh no, no!” she exclaimed, raising her eyes, and refusing to let him take her hand. “How could you think so? How could you mistake me so? I never for a moment dreamed that my love would make you think of breaking your promise; I should have done everything to have hidden it from you, had I thought that. Perhaps I

was wrong to let you guess; but you hurt me so!—and I thought you would be glad because—because you cared for me. I judged your feelings by my own; you cared for me, and it was sweet to know that when I found that—that I cared in return.”—She bent her beautiful face all warm and tender with blushes.

“You judged me from your own sweet soul?” cried Fane. “And you were right so far. Glad!—I never knew the meaning of the word until yesterday afternoon, when I read your love for me in your eyes. But, oh, my love—my love! do you think that is enough to content a man?”

She shrank. “Pray don’t! No; you must not take my hands.”

“Edith, what does this mean? what am I to believe?” he asked, in a studiously quiet voice. But he knew well enough what it meant; there could be no doubt as to the meaning of any of her words.

“You know—oh, you do, you must! You know there can be no more between us,” she said, appealingly.

“So that is it?” he replied, in the same controlled fashion. “You mean that a careless, stupid blunder I made some months ago is to stand between us? You mean that a promise of

the kind that is broken every day is to be kept when I repent of it?"

"What else should I mean?" said Edith, with feeling. "She has a claim upon you. It is more than the mere breaking of a promise—much, much more! She has been engaged to you for some months; she has looked upon you as her future husband; she has been treated by you as your future wife. She has given you her heart, and her confidence, and those weeks of her life in which the thought of you has been associated with the most sacred reserve and tenderness. You have won all this from her, and you cannot, I know you cannot, cast it back to her."

Her voice trembled, she looked at him in earnest, agitated entreaty.

"You have far greater confidence in me than I deserve," said Fane, hastily. "I am neither strong enough nor good enough for such sublimity of sacrifice and self-denial. There is nothing of the hero in me—I want the woman I love," gazing at her beautiful face. "Good God!" he cried, almost violently, "have you the least conception of what you are asking me to do? Do you know what it is to see you—*you*—and to be told I must give you up for the purgatory of an unloving marriage? Oh, Edith,

Edith ! pray don't let any fantastic, absurd scruples about honour keep us apart ! Go away as you have arranged—let us be parted—let us say nothing about the future for a few months, while I free myself and give decent burial and mourning to my unlucky mistake. I have suffered for it bitterly enough ever since I saw your face. Are our lives to be spoilt because of that piece of folly on my part ? ”

“ They need not be spoilt,” she said, gently. “ You are wronging yourself ; you are wronging me. Do you wish to make me ashamed of yesterday ?—to make me regret my self-betrayal ? ”

“ Ashamed ?—regret ?—oh, my love ! ” he exclaimed, with tender adoration.

Edith trembled and drew back. “ Oh no, no ! ” she cried, in an agony. “ You must not say that again ! Oh, we are wrong—we are bitterly wrong ! ” she cried, remorsefully.

“ Why should it be wrong ? How could we help it ? No law parts us. For pity's sake, consider !—consider ! You condemn me to renounce you for another, for the sake of a promise ; but suppose I refuse to do this heroic, impossible promise-keeping ? ”

She looked up at him. His features were pale and set, his eyes were strange.

"Then? Then I should be sorry all my days," she said, with something like a sob, and she moved on a step or two.

He stood where she had left him, and looked up and around with the wild, absent gaze of a man whose last hope is gone.

Edith paused and came back. "I am very sorry," she said, in low, full tones of intense feeling, and in her pity she wanted to take his hand, but dared not, dreading the effect her touch might have. "I am very sorry. But if you did do as you wished we should not be happy. There could be no happiness gained in such a way; no trust and confidence in it. Our very love would be embittered by the consciousness that we had acted treacherously; that we had done a cruel wrong to another. Oh, I could not bear it," she added, almost passionately. "I could not bear that you should gain me so! I should fear to lose your love, I think. I should dread its changing into contempt because I had let you do an unworthy action to win me!"

"Is that your idea of love?" he said, with a wretched laugh. "To me, it sounds more like pride. And I," he went on, recklessly, "I think I would sell my soul to win you. How can you tell me you love me?" He flung the words fiercely from him, and strode away some yards.

Edith sank down on the grass, and sat watching him with tired, listless hands clasped on her lap, and an expression of pale suffering on her face. Why did he make it so hard?—the strain was almost too much to bear, and yet she must not give way to her weariness or utter a word of weakness. All the strength and steadfastness had to come from her. She had no thought of herself; her heart ached for him.

Fane strode over the narrow foot-path, his brain and heart in a tumult of impotent struggle and resistance against this new veto put upon his love. Impetuously and defiantly he declared that he would throw honour to the winds; he would not spend his days in a hideous mockery. But he knew he must. Edith had told him plainly she could not be more to him, and he simply dared not act in a way to pain her; and, besides, beneath the whirl of passionate desire and emotion was a sense of honour which took part with her. Had *it* been unsupported by her words, it would have been disregarded altogether.

After a while he turned and came back to Edith. He threw himself on the grass beside her, and seizing her hands, gazed with burning, haggard eyes into her face.

“Edith, must it be really so?” he asked, imploringly.

"Oh, Austin," she said, imploringly, in turn, using his name for the first time, "you know as well as I do."

He raised one of her hands, and leaned his burning forehead upon it.

"And I hoped so much yesterday," he muttered, brokenly, and Edith felt a hot tear upon her fingers. A great sob rose in her throat, and for a few moments she could not speak. Then she said softly, "You will not let me regret that? I thought only that it would give you some comfort; I never dreamed of anything being changed. And you will change nothing; and soon you will grow contented, even happy, for you will feel sure that you have done right. Ah! and there is one other thing, too. You know you do not like my profession; and yet it is part of me—and so in time you will feel that it has turned out well, and that you have married the woman best suited to be your wife."

"Don't mock me," he groaned.

She felt that her heart would break. Mock him? How could he make such a cruel suggestion.

"You know I shall never think less of you—I cannot change there," he said, with low vehemence. "I have never been influenced by your profession. I cannot say I have altered

my former opinions—prejudices that one grows up with are not readily thrown aside ; and sometimes I have blamed your calling as the cause of all the misery it has brought upon me, and all the barriers put between us. I have grudged your devotion to it ; I have been as jealous as of a rival ; but that is all ; I don't regard it as a part of you. If that is all you fear," he added, with sudden animation, a piteous attempt at hope—" Oh, my love, my own love ! if you only fear that I shall change towards you— ! "

" No, no ! I do not ! It is not that. Let us end it ; let me go in." She stumbled to her feet. " I thought it was settled," she said, with quivering lips. " You are not just to yourself ; your own sense of honour takes part against you—in your heart of hearts it does."

" Oh God, I don't know !" he said, drearily, rising and following her. " I can only think of you, and that we are to part for the rest of our days."

Edith hurried across the field. A necessity was upon her to cut the interview short ; her failing strength warned her she could bear no more.

Near the gate Fane stopped. " Grant me one boon," he said. " Let me kiss you once."

They were hidden in a corner of the field by

the tall bushy hedges. Edith mutely lifted her white face.

Fane put his arms round her, and pressed more than one lingering kiss upon her lips.

"Good-bye, my darling; good-bye, for always," he murmured.

He opened the gate for her, and they parted there.

Edith crossed the lane, and went back to The Cottage, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, moving in a confused bewilderment. She crept up to her room, and flung herself, face downwards, on the bed. What had she done? Was it right? Was it right?—and she could find no answer.

Miss Jacques stole softly up to her on her return from church, and Edith moved a little, and looked at her with wan eyes of woe. Her friend kissed her in silence, seeing how it was; guessing nothing of that yearning question the poor thing longed to put to her, and yet dared not; for had not Miss Jacques decided against her already?





CHAPTER XIV.

OSCAR TRIES HIS FATE.

"I am to do a good turn for them."—*Hamlet*.

"Why must I,

Put any kiss of pardon on thy brow?"

BROWNING.

"ONLY three more days," said Mrs. Jack Chutterworth that morning, as she stood before her toilet-table settling her bonnet with care upon her light fluffy hair. She paused in her self-addressed remark until the delicate task was accomplished to her satisfaction, and then added wrathfully, "and nothing has been done after all! I am *so* disappointed." The disappointment did not refer to her bonnet, for she moved her head from side to side with marked complacency.

A light step and a rustle of silk past the slightly open door reached her ear.

"Winnie!" she called, and Winifred appeared.

She presented a contrast to her friend, in her quiet attire of grey silk, black lace fichu, and cream-coloured hat. So Mona thought, and it struck her too that the contrast was not altogether to her own advantage; she looked discontented as she glanced from her friend to the reflection of her own slim figure in its tightly-fitting costume of pale blue.

"You look far more like church than I do," said she. "What do you think? Is this too showy? But even if it is there is no time to change—but it does look conspicuous."

"Put on your satin mantle—that will tone it down. Here, I will get it out for you," said Winifred, opening the wardrobe.

"Do, there's a darling. Ah, that will do. I hate changing a dress, especially when I haven't worn it before."

They walked to St. Matthew's, for Jack had scruples about using the carriage on Sunday—scruples which his wife had scoffed at, as in duty bound, but which she made no attempt to set aside. Mrs. Chutterworth quickly discovered Oscar in his seat, and she rewarded his devotion by a frown. As she complained, nothing was done. He had heard of Winifred's approaching departure, and the shock had failed to shake any decisive words from his lips. And Mona felt it

extremely hard that her confident expectation should be disappointed. Osear had not deserved her faith in him, and she was disgusted with the dilatory lover. When he joined them after the service, she gave him her limpest of hand-touches, frowned, and walked on with Winifred, leaving Osear to listen to her husband's unceritcal observations upon the sermon.

Her wrath would have cooled greatly had she known how anxious the young man was to put his fate to the touch. He had seen Winifred several times during her stay at the Jaek Chutterworths', and every day he had repented more deeply of his infatuation about Miss Fane. The conscience that he had behaved, to say the least of it, badly to Winifred, made him uncomfortable in her presence. The time of their pleasant intimacy was over. He called himself an idiot for not having valued it at its worth while he had it ; he reddened with shame to think of his sultan-like assurance then. She showed no remembrance of that time ; certainly, she showed no resentment, for her composed, indifferent courtesy was too dignified and unemotional to be called by such a name. He declared with almost grudging admiration that she behaved perfectly. Her manner kept him at arm's-length. He watched her constantly,

but a constrained shyness withheld him from seeking her out and paying her attention. He talked to her less than to anyone else in the room. He never brought her flowers or music or books as he had done so often before. Yet he was thinking always of atoning for his former slight, and wondering how he could unobtrusively and best convey to her a knowledge of his regret and repentance.

The news of her speedy departure was a shock. Time was short ; he must not trust to a gradual process of earning forgiveness. He must risk his fate. He felt by no means sanguine. And he watched still more eagerly after hearing she was going away. Once he fancied that her serene indifference faltered for an instant. He had given an earnest look on taking leave, and a faint blush had risen to her cheek, and her grave hazel eyes had drooped. One or two slight things like these were all he had to build his hopes upon. At the time they lifted up his heart ; but the effect was short-lived, and always followed by despair. Yet, even when he believed there was no chance for him, he did not give up his purpose of making a declaration. He owed her a proposal ; it was the least he could do to atone for his neglect and faithlessness. Then how was he to do it ? what opportunity had he ? He saw her

oftener after hearing of the time of her visit's end, but never under propitious circumstances. Once they happened to be alone together for a few minutes; Oscar looked at Winifred, and the words died on his lips. His courage forsook him entirely; he felt as bashful and embarrassed as any youth in his teens. Thus the time passed, while he waited for an opportunity, and half feared to face it should it come. He thought of writing to her, and rejected the idea at once. He dared not venture his request in a letter; he must explain—he must plead—a letter would be a last expedient. And then he determined on a bold attempt to make his opportunity. He would ask Mrs. Jack Chutterworth's help. Oscar was too reserved to do this easily; but necessity urged, and he had confidence in her goodwill in the affair. When Mona, therefore, allowed him to touch her languid hand as they parted at her gate—for Oscar declined Jack's invitation to enter and share their early dinner—she felt a tiny note slipped into it. An amusing change came over her face. The aggressively bored expression vanished, her fingers closed over the piece of paper, and she shot a glance of amiable intelligence from her sleepy eyes. *Then* she cordially seconded Jack's invitation; but Oscar again declined, and raising his hat, walked off homewards.

As soon as Mona was alone she read the crumpled piece of paper.

"DEAR MRS. CHUTTERWORTH,

"I write to beg your help. Will you give me an opportunity of seeing Miss Noel alone before she leaves you?

"Yours faithfully,

"OSCAR ARDLEY."

Mona clapped her hands like a child.

"My dear fellow, of course I will," she exclaimed.

All was coming right after all, and in a most delightful way. It was doubly pleasant to be of use in bringing the right end about. Mona felt like a benevolent godmother towards these two young people. Her feelings towards Oscar became almost affectionate. Writing materials were in her bedroom, and she sat down at once, and scrawled in huge unwieldy characters an encouraging reply.

"DEAR MR. ARDLEY,

"You shall have the opportunity you wish for to-morrow morning. Call between twelve and one. With best wishes for your success,

"MONA M. CHUTTERWORTH."

She did not send it by messenger—she chose the post which would deliver it to Oscar next

morning. "Suspense is good for lovers," said Mona, as she indited the O. Ardley, Esq., from side to side of the envelope. "And *he* is safe at any rate."

Jack and Winifred were agreeably surprised at the change in her mood at dinner. The frowns and captiousness had vanished; she talked and laughed, quizzed her fellow-worshippers' attire, related the latest absurdity concerning Mr. Stanforth's domestic habits, and, in short, amazed Jack by her apparent heartlessness. Miss Noel was her dearest friend, and was leaving her in three days—and yet!—He alluded to Winifred's departure in a puzzled way that proclaimed his scandalised emotions.

"Would you have us spend the last days in tears behind darkened windows?" said his wife. "Winnie isn't going to the North Pole. I shall have her back soon." Then she laughed with unabashed glee, and Jack fell back on the theory of woman's mysterious nature—the stereotyped wisdom so conveniently provided for the limpest masculine intellect.

Mona was careful, however, to give no hint of the real reason for her good spirits. She was shrewd enough to fancy that Winifred might object to the little arrangement made between Mrs. Chutterworth and Oscar, and might even

prove intractable supposing a breath of it reached her; for I believe she is as dreadfully fastidious as Miss Romney herself, thought Mona. She treated her guest with great affection, and was in the wildest good-humour for the rest of that day; but she did not mention Oscar, and it would have taken some very significant allusions indeed for suspicion as to the real cause of her hilarity to enter Winifred's innocent mind. She merely set down her friend's liveliness to caprice, and, to say the truth, was rather relieved than otherwise that Mona's sorrow for her departure should take this undemonstrative form.

When Oscar called next morning, he found the two girls in the breakfast-room.

"We are so busy," said Mona, looking up from an immense piece of fancy-work, adding reproachfully, "Why have you come to disturb us, Mr. Ardley?"

Oscar stared at her. So staggered was he by this artless speech, that for a moment he fancied that their exchange of notes must be a delusion of his brain. He reddened a little at the awkwardness, and was fain to believe there was an unfathomable depth of malice in Mrs. Jack Chutterworth. In his annoyance he cordially regretted having taken her into his confidence. What a stupid thing it was to have done! He

ought to have known nothing was safe from her tongue.

Mona had no intention of chafing the unhappy lover to exasperation. She uttered her little speech on the impulse of the moment, and congratulated herself on the "promiscuous" air it gave to the call. There was a little talk while she meditated an equally felicitous retiring. As it happened, Winifred unconsciously came to her help.

"Can I have the lace now, Mona?"

"The lace, the lace," said Mona, turning over the heap of things on the table before her. "Are you ready for it so soon?—dear me, how quickly you work! I can't find it—oh, I remember now! I left it up-stairs. I will go and fetch it." She put down her work, took off her thimble, rose and shook the bits of silk off her dress, amiably thinking, "I *hope* he is fuming."

"Never mind," said Winifred.

"I'll go now I'm up," said Mona, easily. "I forgot to tell cook about the sauce—the woman has no memory." She leisurely picked off the bits of silk. "I hope he is on tenter-hooks," thought she; and, elated at the successful way in which she was preparing her retreat, she could not resist pointing it out to the one who could understand and admire. So she held out her

work for Oscar's inspection, and said, with her head on one side, like an inquisitive magpie, the ungrateful young man thought—

"As Olivia says, 'Is it not well done?'" The double meaning was made unmistakable by her significant look.

"Oh, excellent! Rather elaborate, don't you think?" said Oscar, stiffly.

"He *is* fuming," thought Mona. "Oh, I must do it to please myself," she said, coolly. Then mercy prevailed over mischief, and she went away. As she lounged across the hall to the drawing-room she noiselessly clapped her hands in self-applause. "That was *beautifully* acted! Winifred has not the ghost of a suspicion, and won't take fright at being left alone with him. And he isn't grateful! But of course he is awfully nervous, poor fellow. Lovers are pitiable objects—one should make allowance."

Her acting was quite as brilliantly successful as regards her friend as Mrs. Chutterworth believed. Winifred was not at all disturbed at being left alone with Oscar. She leaned back in her chair with idle fingers, waiting for the lace to finish the work she was doing for Mona, and talked with unruffled composure.

Her unconsciousness and self-possession were

not the most helpful preparation for the beginning of Oscar's task. However deeply in earnest a man may be, it must be confessed that the prosaic details of a morning call, and the calm composure of the lady's merely courteous mood, do not supply the best conditions for his declaration. The least sign of consciousness or constraint on Winifred's part would have made some sort of opening. But there was none. She leaned back, talking commonplaces, glancing at him with polite friendliness, and smiling a little now and then, as she would have done with Jack.

And as Oscar heard the sweet, even voice, and looked at the pretty face, which, slightly paler and thinner than when he had known it first, was even prettier, and to him the sweetest on earth, something chilled him; something, he did not know what, seemed to assure him that his suit was hopeless. The words he had prepared died on his lips. What right had he to propose to a girl whom he had so slighted? How was he to ask her forgiveness even?—was it not rather an insult? a taking for granted that his former attentions had disturbed her peace? He got up abruptly in the sting of his dejection. He had forfeited his right to speak words of love to her by his

neglect and faithlessness. And, as he thought this, his eyes were fixed with an almost hungry intentness on her fair face.

His abrupt movement made Winifred glance at him.

She met his eyes. The colour wavered on her cheeks, and she looked down in slight confusion.

"Mona is a long time," she said, embarrassed, and all at once nervously anxious to escape; "I expect she has mislaid the lace. If you will excuse me a moment, Mr. Ardley, I will go and tell her not to trouble about it now."

She rose and crossed the room. Her hand was on the door, when she heard a quick step and her name.

"Miss Noel!—wait one moment; I must say something to you."

She turned her head in surprise. Oscar was close behind.

"I came this morning on purpose," he said, hurriedly. "There is something I must say—I must ask you before you go away. Will you not give me five minutes?"

She crossed the room again slowly, and as though half-doubtful in her compliance. Instead of returning to her seat, she stood on the hearth-

rug and waited, with her hands lightly clasped and held down in front, and her face very pale.

A beginning once made, words came easily to Oscar. Before Winifred was quite aware he had poured forth a confession, assurances of penitence, and a petition for forgiveness. He was declaring earnestly and unaffectedly that he had behaved ill to her—speaking of his fault openly, with far stronger condemnation, far bitterer words than even she had done in her deepest anger against him; and it seemed to the girl as if those minutes were the culmination of all her suffering. In comparison with the acute pain and shame she experienced then all her former feelings were bearable. From the first she had guarded her love jealously as a thing to be ashamed of, and that same humiliation was strengthened tenfold by the present fear that he *had* divined it. She stood as still as a statue, her white face downcast, and her cold hands locked tightly together. Her one idea was to preserve her secret—she was too much absorbed by that endeavour to read the meaning of Oscar's rapid, agitated speech and disturbed manner. How could she acknowledge she had anything to forgive him in such a matter? To do so would be to proclaim her weakness at once.

Oscar drew the worst conclusions from her still attitude and silence. He had time to explain all, to repeat himself in various places while Winifred struggled for power to answer him as indifferently as she wished. She wanted to show him clearly his mistake; to prove the absurdity of these remarks—their absolute irrelevancy as far as she was concerned, and to do so she must be serenely, even carelessly, composed. Had she only been able to laugh!—to laugh at his tragedy! But her heart was stirred too suddenly and too deeply; her nerves were thrilled by the unexpected occurrence. She was not an accomplished woman of the world; only womanly pride and instinct drove her to acting. Oscar broke off. She raised her face, and after a moment's effort her eyes, and looked at him coldly and haughtily.

“Mr. Ardley, what have I to do with this?”

“I beg your pardon?” quickly.

“Why do you say all this to me? What have I to do with your courtship of Miss Fane? It seems to me that your assumption of having anything to ask my forgiveness for in the matter alone needs an apology.”

This was not quite candid, and the girl was bitterly conscious of the fact. She had spoken

on an impulse of resentment against Oscar for inflicting this painful scene upon her. He ought to have spared her this! Her heart beat fast as soon as the words were said—what might he not answer? His next words might press her too hardly.

Oscar took a few steps across the room and back again, while she waited in fear and suspense.

She must go through with this. She did not even wish for Mona to interrupt them. The matter must be made quite clear and satisfactory. She would not retreat; to show too deep annoyance, too much insulted pride, too much feeling of any kind, would betray too much of the truth.

Oscar paused opposite, and Winifred's heart beat so violently that she needed all her self-control to refrain from laying her hand upon it.

"You do not understand me quite," said Oscar, with anxious earnestness. "I want to tell you more—if you will allow me. I ask your forgiveness because I know—only I, myself—how much I need it. The fact that I did not commit myself with you, that you did not see the truth of my unfortunate behaviour, does not lessen the wrong I have done."

Winifred's hands trembled, and a painful blush crossed her white face.

"I ask your forgiveness," went on Oscar, "because I was faithless to you—faithless to you and to my love for you. Yes, I am sure I loved you then," he said, reddening deeply, and looking much ashamed. "That evening on the racecourse I meant—I wished to say so to you. And then I saw Miss Fane again, and the old feeling overwhelmed me; I was mad—I was infatuated—fascinated. It was sheer infatuation, and I yielded weakly to it. I hate to look back to those weeks—I have endured only miserable shame and disgust since. All the time I seemed to know how wild and mad it was, and that I was wilfully throwing away something so much better—so much sweeter—so much—oh! my only chance of happiness, in short—for at bottom of my heart I *knew* the whole folly and hopelessness of my infatuation. I never deluded myself really with hopes—she had refused me once—that was when I was in London. Forgive me for troubling you—perhaps I ought to have kept silence. I have made a mistake, perhaps—but—but—it was because I knew so well how much I owed you an apology."

"I assure you, Mr. Ardley, you have my

forgiveness for anything you think you need it," said Winifred, frankly. She was not so deathly white now; a little colour and warmth had come into her face; the jealous guard she had assumed was unneeded, and she laid it down with a sense of relief and ease.

"You must despise me!" exclaimed Oscar. "But you cannot despise me as much as I despise myself. I was a fool—I was crazy to let anything come in the way of my love for you!"

"I think you must be mistaken in thinking you did—care for me," she said gently.

"I am not mistaken in that—my mistake was in ever forgetting it for a moment. What must you think of me?" he said, in a tone of deep sorrow and self-upbraiding. "No wonder you say that! You will not be able to believe me—you must think me absurd to talk about affection after behaving so. And yet I *did* love you then—even then; I was on the point of saying so to you; but I love you tenfold more now. I love you better every day—every day I understand more fully how great and dear a happiness I have recklessly thrown away all chance of." He broke off in agitation.

Winifred left the hearthrug and went to the

window, where she stood looking out. She was chiefly conscious of a sad feeling of regret and loss. She remembered vividly her pride in him when first aware of her love, and contrasted that glad discovery with the present. Ah! why—why had he cast down her proud ideal?—why had he done love and himself such dishonour that he must come to her speaking of pardon and wrong and unworthiness? A pathetic deprecation filled her heart. Anger and resentment were quite gone. She knew well that she loved him still, and would love him alone, simply because he was he, himself, the man to whom her heart had been given once and for always.

Oscar waited a few moments, and then said in low, shaking tones, which betrayed almost more than his words how completely he accepted his loss,

“I thought if you forgave me I might venture to plead my cause for the future—for a hope that some time, perhaps, you would hear me favourably; but——”

“I said I forgave you,” she said, slowly and unsteadily.

He came nearer to her. “Oh, Winifred, Winifred! I love you so—let me plead! I can’t give up—I can’t accept a future without

some far-off hope unless you bid me. If I wait, if I prove to you my sorrow for the past, can you allow me the least encouragement to come and ask you later?"

But Winifred turned round and held out her hands, her fair face rosy, and her eyes shining through tears. "Oscar," she said, and faltered; and as he grasped her hands with a sudden lighting up of his whole face, she held back and looked up at him—lovelier than he had ever seen her, so he thought, in grateful admiration. "Don't mention that word forgiveness again; I want to forget that time, and for you to forget it, too. And I was wrong just now—I did love you then."

Half-an-hour after Mona tapped at the door of her friend's bedroom.

"I would not have disturbed you, dear," she said; "but—why, where are you going?"

"To The Cottage, to see Aunt Edith."

"Am I nobody?" asked Mona, tragically.

"I thought you were engaged with a caller."

"Louisa—I could have despatched her at a moment's notice. I have waited in an agony of suspense—do tell me, is it all right? Of course Miss Romney's claims come first, but as I am more on the spot, so to speak, do reward me for my patient waiting—because I must confess I

suspected from various signs and tokens the desperate nature of his enterprise. Confide in a friend," coaxingly.

"I don't think there is much to confide—you have guessed," said Winifred, laughing and colouring.

Mona embraced her warmly. "Oh, I am so glad! I *love* him now, and all the world. Oh, it *is* nice!" After a few more raptures she stopped abruptly. "Take off your hat. There is no need for this solitary walking pilgrimage to confession. I came to tell you Miss Romney is in the drawing-room."

"Oh!" cried Winifred, tossing her hat on the bed. "Mona, why didn't you tell me? I am *longing* to see her!"

"I have told you. Stop a moment, you impetuous, doting niece; Louisa is there still, and I suppose you don't want to make your terrible confession to her also. I will ask Miss Romney to come up to you. Shall I?"

"Please. And, Mona, *don't* do anything else first."

Two minutes after Edith entered the room and turned a questioning look towards Winifred. The girl sprang to the motherly arms, and poured out her little story with her face hidden on her aunt's shoulder. It was not all

glad ; some tears flowed even when she said she was happy ; and, to her surprise, Edith's rare tears fell too as she spoke her hearty congratulations. Winifred had had some doubt as to her approval, but Edith did not utter a word of regret, or one slighting of Oscar.

Both Edith and Oscar dined with the Jack Chutterworths that evening. Oscar brought Winifred a kind message from his father—his love, and regret that a severe cold which confined him to his room prevented his giving his congratulations in person. Mrs. Ardley would call to-morrow, added Oscar.

Mona, in a stage aside, quoted a certain sentence about the whirligig of time ; and when she bade Winifred good night in her room, she said, gleefully, "I shall be *so* happy to-morrow while Mrs. Ardley is trying to fulfil her exacting husband's demands, for *she* will be perfectly miserable."

"A few hours ago you declared you loved the whole world !"

"So I do still—with one or two judicious exceptions," replied the unabashed Mona.

Next morning Dr. Fullagher called at The Cottage to bid Edith good-bye. He carried a pretty fancy basket filled with lovely flowers and ferns, and this he presented to Edith.

"May I ask a question?" said Miss Jacques, who watched the presentation in not unnatural surprise. Fullagher shot an uneasy glance at her.

"It depends upon the question," he replied, with a touch of surliness. "I dare not presume to suggest the doubt of a lady's discretion which would be implied by a refusal."

"I see," said Miss Jacques, nodding. "I am put on my guard. Well, I only want to know if these flowers are your own."

"Well, ma'am, it is not my habit to express my respect for my friends by making them receivers of stolen goods."

"Now, doctor, you know what I mean! Are they out of your own garden—your own precious nurslings?" Miss Jacques looked unmistakably wicked.

The doctor met her glance defiantly. "They are—for this once only."

"The exception that proves the rule? Exactly. I am glad you have got over the disagreeable necessity so safely, doctor; and I am relieved to find it is an isolated event—not the first change in a life's habit. Those sort of changes make one so anxious. You could not have chosen a better recipient, doctor—your wisdom is never at fault. Miss Romney will not publish

the unparalleled honour she has received—for one safe reason, she is quite unaware of the peculiarity of the favour. Now, had *I* received those flowers I should have had them preserved and sent to the museum, with an explanatory legend attached. You would have done good by stealth, and blushed to find it fame.”

“I certainly should. There is no question about the blushing part. Good heavens, what an escape!” with fervent thankfulness.

“The danger being so imminent!” laughed Miss Jacques.

“One never knows,” said the doctor. “But after the warning you have been good enough to give me there is no further danger.”

It was evident, however, that the doctor was not in a talkative humour. He still limped, and perhaps the late attack of gout had subdued his spirits, for he was graver and quieter than his wont. Or was it sorrow for his friend’s mischance?—Miss Jacques chose that reason for his depression. She caught him glancing sadly and searchingly at Edith more than once, and she knew from old experience that his spirits were elastic on recovery from an attack. He only stayed a few minutes, and he bade Edith good-bye very kindly.

“Good-bye, Miss Romney,” he said, gently

squeezing her hand. "I wish you every success."

"Good-bye, Dr. Fullagher," she answered, looking gratefully at him. "Good-bye—and thank you heartily for all your kindness."

"Don't hurry me away," he deprecated; "I believe I had something else to say. I hope you will have all the success you deserve—you have no idea what a handsome share I am wishing for you! It is wildly improbable." And then, as she smiled sadly, "No, don't mistake me. I meant that my wish was extravagant as things go—the world not being as a rule in any danger of paying people their honest deserts. But I hope you will get a fair percentage, at least. I suppose I shall hear of you sometimes through Miss Jacques? She will not lose sight of you."

"Am I—a man?" said Miss Jacques, scornfully.

"There, there, I am going," he said, soothingly. Miss Jacques accompanied him into the garden in order to ask his advice concerning a rose-tree which did not flourish in accordance with its opportunities.

The doctor cast his eyes abstractedly over the tree.

"It has a hang-dog look," he remarked. "I'll lend you Jackson for an hour or two. Show him

the thing—don't speak to him—leave him to work his will upon it, and he'll do the best he can." He stroked his beard with savage energy, and abruptly said—"Here's a precious mess now."

"What do you know about it?"

"Enough to make me uncomfortable," he growled.

"*You* uncomfortable!"

"Yes, I. A man can't suffer alone. When Fane moons round in a perpetual 'to be or not to be' sort of fashion, I can't enjoy my dinner or his company. I think I shall travel; I have no idea of wasting my strength in sympathetic sighs. I had perfect confidence in Fane's strength of mind," he added, ruefully. "What do you think about it all?"

"Think!" she retorted, with a sparkle in her deep eyes, and a flush on her worn cheek. "Think! Why I think I have even more to be grateful to you for than I expected that day a year ago when I first heard of Dr. Fane."

"You forget how heavily my friend is afflicted. Come, you must admit we are quits."

"With the small exception of the loss of a practice on one's friend's side, and the gain on the other," she said, ironically. "Yet, after all, I believe in spite of that trifling fact there is some

equality in the misfortune. Your friend will be more unhappy than mine."

"A woman's idea of equality!" exclaimed Dr. Fullagher. "But of course he will be more unhappy," he added. "The unlucky fellow is in love. Miss Romney may succeed in getting another practice together, but he is not likely to care for another woman as he does for her."

"Yes; you are right," said Miss Jacques, remembering that Dr. Fullagher was not likely to be aware of the state of the case, as regarded Edith's feelings. "We are quits then."

"They have got home again at Bycroft Hall," said the doctor, very dejectedly. "Fane is asked to lunch there this morning."

"Is he going?" asked Miss Jacques quickly.

"He can't very well refuse, you know. He's going, right enough. Well, I can't congratulate you on this tree, Miss Jacques. It strikes me as being an interesting failure altogether. Good morning. I won't forget to send Jackson."

He took his departure, and Miss Jacques returned to The Cottage. "I will tell her he is going there this morning," she said to herself. "It will set her mind at rest."



CHAPTER XV.

NICHOLSON EXERTS HIMSELF.

“Great shame and sorrow of that fall he tooke.”

SPENSER.

It must not be supposed that Mr. Nicholson had withdrawn altogether from the scene on Sunday morning—his proceeding up the road had been merely a polite concession to necessity. After a few yards he had glanced back, and had seen Fane disappear through the gate of the buttercup-field. He then paused ; and finding that the doctor did not re-issue in the course of five minutes, and that, therefore, it was safe to conclude he had not entered the field merely for a *ruse*, the greengrocer retraced his steps. He clambered over the gate into the field adjoining the meadow—it was a field of young wheat ; and had the owner discovered him, it might have proved unfortunate for Nicholson’s purpose. Nothing so untoward occurred. The owner was

at church, and Nicholson slunk along by the hedge till he reached the boundary between the two fields. The hedge was high and bushy, and screened him well; and as he found a convenient gap for a peephole, he congratulated himself upon a propitious fate. Undisturbed, he remained motionless, watching patiently the pair in the meadow, his mouth open, and his blood-shot eyes almost starting from his head.

He had spent a great deal of time hanging about the neighbourhood of The Cottage since that morning when Edith saw him first; but he had watched Fane for some time before that. Ever since the evening of the concert, and that little affair in the entry, he had honoured Fane by the deadliest hatred. He had brooded over that knocking down with the bitterest vindictiveness, until revenge for it had become his fondest day-dream. His companions had not allowed him to forget his chastisement—so embittered had his days become by ruthless allusions and sneers that he had been forced to leave his snug corner at the Queen's Head for a public-house at a less convenient distance. Their gibes and taunts were all the more frequent and spirited because their unerring effect added zest to his tormentors' ingenuity. Nicholson had come to hate and fear his old acquaintances, and in

moments of drunken courage had even shown fight—only to be beaten again.

That fall by the doctor's hand was the precursor of many, and the malignant man laid all to Fane's door. He hated his former friends and shunned them, but he hated Fane worst; for it was one thing to be beaten in fight with his equals, another to be struck down as a punishment by a gentleman. His helpless whimpering assertion that he could kill his chastiser was no exaggeration of excitement. But alas, alas, for the hopes of revenge! how was it possible to kill a man safely? Nicholson was not one to run risks of so terrible a nature,—he might have ventured upon a stab in the dark, it is true, but he had a nervous shrinking from any personal contact—even conducted on the most prudent principles—with the big, strong man who had felled him so easily. He longed to do this strong man harm—harm that would hurt him most effectually and most cruelly, but he could not think calmly of the mildest encounter.

His thoughts and plans for revenge were all confused and undefined. He watched his enemy's house with the fascinated interest everything about Fane had for him now, and dogged his steps on dark nights, full of his evil longings, and of the exasperating, maddening consciousness

of his utter impotence to hurt the prosperous, vigorous, fortunate gentleman. Nicholson's hatred was intensified by every point of difference between them : his enemy was above him in every respect ; and for every advantage, both personal and worldly, the craven-hearted creature cursed him.

The same spirit of fascinated curiosity led him to haunt the precincts of The Cottage after seeing Fane and Edith issuing from the buttercup meadow together. He hated Miss Romney as warmly as he hated Dr. Fane—had she not brought him into trouble with the doctor ?

At first he was astonished to find the two rivals on speaking, not to say friendly, terms. He noticed Fane's regular visits during that week of Bill's illness, and gradually a dim light began to shed itself upon the confused lumber composing his mind. The affair of the medicine proved that he possessed a spark of imagination of a not altogether despicable activity. He began dully to comprehend what had so far appeared an inexplicable mystery to him—the doctor's taking Miss Romney's part about that "poison-business." A disinterested love of truth for its own sake was a flight above the green-grocer's power of understanding and appreciation, but he could see some reason for Fane's perplex-

ing championship if, to use his own words, he was "sweet on her."

This Sunday morning he witnessed their meeting in the lane; and, burning with curiosity, trembling with the delightful excitement of one on the brink of a great discovery, it was beyond the power of mortal man to retreat at such a critical moment. No, he braved the fear of the doctor's strong arm, and skulked to the post of observation described.

And there he witnessed almost the whole scene—he could hear no words, and the gestures were slightly puzzling, but the farewell, embarrassingly close, was the key to the whole position. The most primitive of minds sees the meaning of a kiss.

When Fane clashed the clumsy gate behind him, and strode off at an impetuous pace down the road, Nicholson was sitting in the ditch, a shapeless figure of spite and vindictive joy. He had sunk down in a sort of panic as the pair approached that corner by the gate, and he remained in a collapsed state of quivering excitement for some minutes after they had separated. The whole state of the matter was clear to him now—Dr. Fane cared for Miss Romney and was sorry to part from her, but he kept true to Miss Lorimer because she had money. This was a

motive for faithfulness which appealed irresistibly to Nicholson's understanding and experience ; he keenly appreciated the wisdom of marrying for money, for he could still remember the charm which knowledge of his Susan's savings had thrown over all her attractions. No man in his senses would lose the chance of a fortune for mere love's sake.

"I'll be even with him now," he muttered exultantly, as he scrambled out of the ditch after an interval long enough to put the doctor a safe distance ahead. "I'll spoil his little game."

He panted with the intensity of his hatred and his triumphant assurance that a power of revenge lay in his hand. He would spoil the doctor's game ; he would ruin his chances with Miss Lorimer ; he would make Fane lose the fortune he coveted. No doubt as to his mere word being taken as truth itself, and having power to do all this, disturbed Nicholson. He was full of confidence.

He hurried home as fast as his shambling gait would allow. It was some time past their dinner-hour when he entered his house, and the meat was in consequence overdone. Poor Mrs. Nicholson trembled as she hastened to set the dishes on the table, knowing well that for all such misfortunes, however unavoidable, she was

held solely responsible. As she dolefully complained to her intimates, in innocent unconsciousness of the literal meaning of her words, "She got the weight of everything."

"You're late, Nicholson," she observed, apologetically. "I'm afraid the dinner's done too much."

Nicholson snarled over the meat he was disposing of in something of the tearing fashion of a dog.

"D—— the dinner! Ain't it allays spoilt? Hold your tongue!"

Mrs. Nicholson held her tongue, thankful at being let off so easily, but still a little uneasy. Such apathy on her husband's part was unnatural, to say the least. Had he ever before let so good an opportunity for "correction" pass unused? It is true he did not wait for opportunities, but had he ever let one escape? He had been strange lately—his neglect of the shop was not an uncommon and by no means an undesirable thing, but then he had not come home at nights in the glorious state of inebriation belonging to these periods of idleness. After relating these alarming changes to her friend Mrs. Sparre over the counter, Mrs. Nicholson had tearfully added, "It looks bad—as if he was goin' to be took."

"And a blessed riddance too," replied Mrs.

Sparre, sweeping a large cabbage and a quarter of a stone of potatoes into her ample apron. "You'll do a deal better without him, drat him. I'll pay another day, my man's been on the spree this last week, and hasn't done a hand's turn." And, scattering anathemas upon the erring cobbler as she went, the sympathetic virago returned to her own dwelling.

Nicholson's plan, as far as practical details went, was vague in the extreme; one thing only was fixed—his securing an interview with Miss Lorimer—but how or when this was to be managed he left with touching dependence to the chances of circumstance. He knew the Lorimers were away—to find out the time of their return was of course the first step; and having dressed himself with unusual care after dinner, he sallied out for an afternoon stroll to Bycroft.

The day was warm, and a steady walk of four miles was quite an achievement for the green-grocer. Exhausted nature craved support, and he sought out the Bycroft Arms at once. When somewhat restored he asked a question or two.

"Hall's empty, ain't it?"

"Yes," replied the landlady, not agreeably enough impressed by her customer's appearance and manners to care to answer loquaciously.

“When ’ull the folks get back, eh?” asked he, with a furtively anxious look.

“To-morrow.”

Nicholson’s spirits rose. He finished his beer, and soon after left the inn. The Hall was a little nearer Wanningster than Bycroft village, and he retraced his steps. He spent half-an-hour or so leaning over the park palings gazing at the old house, grey and weather-stained in the soft sunshine, and gloating over his revenge in all its sweetness and completeness.

Although he knew the family were only expected to return on Monday, he dawdled away most of the day in the lane near the Hall. Loitering and smoking out of doors in fine summer weather was always a congenial way of spending the hours to Nicholson; how much more so when the loafing was ennobled by a purpose so great!

About five in the afternoon his patience was rewarded by the sight of the Hall carriage bringing the “family,” or rather two members of it, from the station. Nicholson was very near the lodge gates when it passed him, and he bent forward with eager curiosity from his seat on the grassy bank at the side of the foot-path. There were two ladies in the carriage: the younger one, her pale, pretty face in a frame of soft

auburn hair, leaned over the side to look at the house just as they passed. A strong whiff of tobacco brought her eyes from the distance to the foreground, and they were met disagreeably by the sullen, eager stare of the shabby individual at the roadside. She drew back in dainty disgust at once.

"That's her, then," thought Nicholson. He watched the carriage turn into the gate. There could be no mistake. "I'll tell her to-morrow," he said, with excited anticipation, and sauntered homewards.

Next morning, accordingly, he was in Bycroft Lane again. He had not considered how to bring the interview about, and, as he prowled outside the Hall gates, the difficulties in the way of getting an opportunity of speaking to Miss Lorimer presented themselves, to his no small disgust. He cast longing glances at the Hall, standing secluded and unapproachable (as it seemed to him) in its well-kept grounds, and guarded by the lodge at the gates. Nicholson did not like the lodge; if he had not had to pass that he thought it would have been easy enough to proceed boldly to the house itself and ask to see Miss Lorimer. The lodge was a hindrance. He passed it and re-passed it, gazing longingly up the drive, and trying to summon courage to

go through the gate. Then there was a further difficulty—after he reached the Hall he might not be able to speak to Miss Lorimer. She did not know him; the servant might send him away. He hung about in indecision, lacking courage to make the attempt, in the half-expectant manner of one who fancies chance may aid him.

About twelve o'clock, as he began to meditate wistfully on the cool parlour at *The Arms*, and the advisability of proceeding thither in quest of dinner, the gate clicked, and, wheeling round, he saw the person he desired to speak to coming towards him. Nicholson stopped short in great excitement, stared eagerly, and made a half-attempt to touch his hat.

Violet glanced slightly, her attention attracted by the man's abrupt stop, and seeing a stranger, went on.

Nicholson did not understand this escape of his opportunity—he had not found words in time, and she had gone on. He shuffled after, feeling awkward and uncomfortable at the prospect of addressing the young lady who was walking towards the village with light steps, a trim and dainty figure in crisp lilac muslin. He gained courage, however, as she disappeared into one of the cottages, and remembered she would have to come back. He would tell her then. He sat

down on the grass at the side of the lane and waited.

In less than half an hour Violet returned. A feeling of drowsiness had made Nicholson close his eyes, and she was almost beside him before he noticed her approach. He hastily stumbled to his feet, touching his hat awkwardly, and stepping nearly in front of her.

Violet stopped when she perceived that this curious-looking individual really wished to draw her attention.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked, kindly, in spite of a slight uneasiness the man's strange behaviour gave her.

Nicholson's hand went up to his hat again, while his loose, unsteady lips muttered some inarticulate reply.

"You don't live in the village, I think?" said Violet, looking at him more closely, and growing still more uneasy. She glanced down the lane, wishing someone would appear in sight.

"No, miss; I live in the town yonder—1, Oyster Street," said Nicholson. "I keeps the fruiterer's shop at the corner—a 'spectable place, with everythink as good an' cheap as is to be got in the markets; though Dick Tuggles, a friend of mine, cries up 'is rubbish, and says

as mine ain't fit for Christians, but only pigs—but Tuggles is in the same way of business 'isself, and is nat'rally jealous of a 'andsome concern like mine—the red paintin' over the door in pertic'ler."

Once afloat, it was evident that Nicholson felt he had at last found the congenial atmosphere he pined for in the society of the "quality." While Violet was rapidly wondering why he had addressed her. She began to fear he must be some talkative lunatic, with a mission for disturbing people on the highway.

"I don't know you," she said, walking on. "You have mistaken me for someone else. If you have a good business you are not in want."

"A poor man is always in want," said Nicholson, shuffling eagerly after. To do him justice, he had not started with any idea of deriving pecuniary benefit from his enterprise. But though "on pleasure bent" he had, if not a frugal, a very greedy mind, and that mind was not one to regret an improvement on his own scheme simply because it was suggested by another. If he could get pay for his revenge as well as the satisfaction of it, the greengrocer was well content.

"Business always goes contrary with a poor

man," he said with trembling eagerness, forgetting his eulogies upon his business. "Dealers is 'ard on 'im, and times is bad just now; and if you was thinkin' of givin' me a little 'elp, ma'am, I should be thankful." He held out a shaking palm of mottled red and black.

Violet would gladly have given money to go her way unmolested, but she remembered she had none with her, and coloured with annoyance.

"I do not mean to give you money," she said, plucking up spirit, and stopping short. "If you have a good business you do not need charity. Please go back now."

"I didn't come for no charity," said Nicholson, with a growl. The allusion to money was unfortunate in upsetting his temper. Before hearing that word his sentiments towards Violet had been of good fellowship—they were both wronged by the same person—but her refusal to give him money produced an instantaneous change in his feelings. He was not on her side any longer—"she was all of a piece with the rest;" by "the rest" meaning those higher up in the world than himself; and for this spiritless sameness of material the greengrocer hated her as he hated "the rest." The abrupt

change of feeling did not affect his plan; on the contrary, it added a still keener relish to his anticipated revenge, and a zest to his mode of getting at it. Miss Lorimer would suffer as well as the hated doctor; she would be confounded in the same confounding of his enemy. "I axed for nothink till you spoke of it first," he growled. "Though a man as takes the trouble of leavin' his shop to take care on itself to come a weary four miles on a h'arrand to a lady might nat'rally expect to get a trifle for his pains."

Violet looked at him doubtfully. "Is your errand to me?" she asked.

He nodded emphatically twice, his furtive, sunken eyes fixed on her face, greatly to her mystification and discomfort. He must be deluded—mad. If only she were at home! She hurried on again.

Nicholson's dignity was hurt. This was not the reception he had looked for; there was no open-hearted, confidential air about this interview. He had expected to enjoy the importance of a messenger who brings great and interesting tidings; to have his tidings received with eager, breathless curiosity; to be regarded gratefully as a benefactor and a friend. There was a touch of suspicion in Miss

Lorimer's manner exceedingly distasteful to him. "I 'ave somethink very pertic'lar to say to you, ma'am, and it's about yourself," he said, moving too.

Violet quickened her steps. This was intolerable. The man must be drunk as well as mad.

"It's somethink very pertic'lar about the doctor, too—Dr. Fane."

"You are quite mistaken; you can have nothing to say to me!" flashed out Violet, stopping so abruptly, and speaking with such sharp displeasure that the man shrank. "Go back," she said, with an imperious gesture. "What do you mean by behaving in this way?" —A sudden fear shot into her mind even as she spoke. "Oh, tell me!" she exclaimed, imploringly, "is he ill? Has there been an accident? Tell me!"

Nicholson, who had quailed before her anger, took on a sullen, threatening air at her first change of tone. He showed his teeth in a malicious snarl at her anxiety, and muttered a curse on Fane, which expressed such a heartfelt wish that some accident had befallen her betrothed, that Violet's fear for him took wing, and she returned to her present alarm. She walked on fast, and, in his enervated state,

Nicholson found it difficult to keep up with her and to talk too.

"I'm to go back, am I, Miss? I'm not good enough to talk to such a fine lady, ain't I? I mayn't speak of that precious doctor of yours, mayn't I? How would you like to know as he's tired of the lady he's goin' to marry because she's rich and 'ull fetch 'im money, and goes a makin' love to that other one as purtends to be a doctor herself?" The man's passion made him hoarse. The words were pelted at her pantingly and disjointedly, and Violet heard every one as she hurried along, straining her eyes for the turn of the park palings which would bring the gate and lodge into sight. Her silence and apparent deafness irritated Nicholson beyond endurance. His terrible story had no effect, and he had pictured horror, amazement, and indignation in appetising abundance and variety at his first hint. "I seen 'im with my h'own h'eyes," he panted out. "I know what I'm talkin' on. Wasn't he a-goin' constant to 'The Cottage' the last week or more? Didn't they walk h'out together? Didn't she meet 'im in the lane h'only last Sunday morning, and he took both 'er 'ands and looked—why, as if he were a goin' to kiss 'er, and then he see me and didn't. But he *did* h'after—when they'd been a talkin' together for

some time in a field, he put 'is h'arm round 'er and kissed 'er—a good 'un. I seen that with my h'own h'eyes h'only Sunday morning—and I seen them talkin' a long while in the field. I come to you as a friend—I thought as you ought to know—'cos it seemed a shame as he should get your money when he's sweet on the other."

The gate was reached, and Violet hurried through. Nicholson's chance was over.





CHAPTER XVI.

PROMISES.

. . . “that sad word *joy*.”—LANDOR.

VIOLET's first impulse was to gain the shelter of the house, and she walked rapidly up the drive. Before many yards, however, she realised her safety anywhere in their own grounds—that man would not dare to intrude upon her here—and the many windows of the old Hall oppressed her like the gaze of curious human eyes. She wanted to be alone; to run no chance of meeting anyone, or of being questioned. A little path ran behind the shrubbery that skirted the flower-garden in front of the house, and led to a pretty private wood beyond the lawn at the side. She would be alone, and hidden in the wood, and she took the path. When at length she reached the welcome shade and obscurity of the trees, she sank down breathless on the fallen trunk of an old tree. For a while she sat with

hidden face, shrinking with intense physical repulsion from the way in which the truth had reached her—or, rather, had been forced home upon her. For it was the truth; it met those many doubts and fears in her own heart which had before been but dim confusion, and threw them into clear illumination; it was supported by substantial evidence in her own memory; it supplied the meaning of the dissatisfaction, the heart-hunger, the weary restlessness of the last few months.

She did not know who that man was; she had never seen him before, to her knowledge; he had startled and frightened her; it was a nightmare to think he knew anything about her most private affairs; she shuddered with disgust and horror at his coarse interference. But the worst of all was that this false-faced, malicious man had spoken the truth; the drift of his remarks was true, whether the details were or not. She could not rid herself of his image by saying—It is a lie.

All the little circumstances which had struck her as strange and uncomfortable, which had puzzled and disturbed her, and which she had tried to forget, or at least to ignore, partly through loyal faith in her lover, partly because she dared not ask herself what that dull fore-

boding fear meant—all those perplexing, torturing trifles crowded into vivid remembrance and meaning. She had been blind—wilfully blind, she pitilessly told herself—she had deluded and deceived herself; in this new, bitter self-scorn and shame she accused herself of cowardice. She had seen him unhappy, and had not offered to release him—had not even ventured to ask for the reason of his unhappiness, because of that fear of the truth lurking in her heart. She had come home longing to see him, eager to find that all the doubts and fears were needless, that they would be again as in those first weeks of their engagement, and this was her welcome!

Then she remembered the charge of faithlessness brought by Nicholson—it was not difficult to believe. She had a very modest opinion of her own attractions, and, perhaps, a rather extravagant estimate of the power of beauty. Miss Romney was beautiful, and Violet had always regarded her attainments with reverence. She went back to those last weeks before the concert, ruthlessly searching for any little circumstance which might confirm that man's story—although there had been time for the whole change during her absence! The first thing that occurred to her memory was that little scene on the evening of the concert itself—when he had

spoken so strangely to her at the door of the waiting-room. He was with Miss Romney then—she remembered it with a flash. How strangely he had behaved all that evening! His manner had been utterly incomprehensible to her at the time, and, indeed, until now—but now she understood. Looking carefully back, it seemed to her that for some time before that evening there had been a curious change in his way of speaking about Miss Romney; the scoffing tone had suddenly and entirely ceased, he had appeared to dislike even mentioning her name. That man's declaration this morning explained everything.

He had not loved her. It had been only a passing fancy. Now she faced the truth, she faced it fully. She would not soften any of it—she had not been loved by him.

She rose up and walked slowly to the house. It was near the luncheon hour, and Fane was expected to lunch with them. She must be ready to receive him. No one met her on her way to her room, and for that she was thankful—she felt so strange, she must surely look strange; what had happened must be written in white, drawn wretchedness upon her face. She took off her hat and gloves, and examined herself carefully in the glass. Her dainty morning

dress was as crisp and fresh as when she had started ; even her fastidiousness saw no reason to change it. Her hurried flight from Nicholson had only ruffled a few silken threads of her glossy hair. But her face was the chief anxiety. Its expression startled her. It was white and haggard. There were pinched lines of suffering about the pale lips, and a fixed wretchedness stared at her out of the blue eyes. She pressed her hands hard upon her cheeks, as if she would smooth out those tell-tale lines, and bring back some colour and warmth.

“ Oh, where is my pride ? ” she murmured. “ He will read all in my face. Oh, I look old, old. I look wretched and heart-broken, and he must not suspect that I am that when he never cared to have my heart—when he never gave me his own.”

At that thought she raised her head in injured pride. Her cheeks were brightly flushed, her lips were warm, her eyes shone steadily ; she gave another searching glance at herself, and walked down-stairs.

Mrs. Lorimer looked up from her work when her daughter entered the drawing-room.

“ Ah, there you are, Violet. I began to fear you were extending your walk too far, and would be late. Exercise has brought some lovely roses

to your cheeks, my dear. Austin will rejoice to see that your stay abroad, in spite of all the anxiety and suspense, has been beneficial to your health. I hope he will not be late."

Violet had taken a seat near one of the windows.

"Here he is, mamma," she said, calmly. She was screened by the window curtain and could watch his approach, unseen herself. Her heart gave a leap of almost fierce love and welcome the moment her eye fell on his figure, and then she remembered—he was hers no longer. With eager eyes she gazed, dwelling on every line and feature with a cruel determination to spare herself no sign which should corroborate the truth. And with sight thus sharpened she saw the full difference between his appearance and air now and when she knew him first.

He was walking rather slowly; the elasticity and vigour which had characterised his gait a few months ago were absent. He "went heavily," looking neither to the right hand nor to the left—he used to come with a light, springing step, his head well carried, casting quick glances of careless interest on either side. That air of vigorous strength and well-being, which had seemed to express the large and free enjoyment of a man who finds life to his taste,

and which had charmed Violet with a sense of liberal health and support and cheerfulness, had left him. His bent face was grave and impassive, and, to the anxious watcher, giving the impression of being tutored by a deep sorrow to its neutrality of expression.

A sharp sting pierced the girl's wounded heart.

"Faith to me has cost him dear," she thought.

"He does not look well," observed Mrs. Lorimer, who had put down her work, and placed herself openly in her window. "Do you not notice a change, Violet? Ah, it is the suspense! He has been unhappy. Well, it is over now, and we must do our best to make up by making no further delays. That is the least we can do. So, my dear, when he broaches the important question, be frank and kind—no coquetry, my love! Men's patience has a limit, and I must say poor Austin's has been unfortunately—although unavoidably—tried."

"Mamma," began Violet, hurriedly. She was about to entreat her mother to make no allusion to the important question of "the day;" but there was no time.

The door opened and Dr. Fane was announced. Mrs. Lorimer greeted him almost effusively. Violet rose from her chair, and held out her hand, not looking up. Fane stooped to kiss her

—for a moment she shrank, and then submitted. She must go on with the farce for a short time longer.

“Such a happy meeting!” exclaimed Mrs. Lorimer. “Far, far happier than I ventured to hope it would be. Ah, those days—weeks of dreadful anxiety!—We ought indeed to be grateful.”

Fane inquired after Miss Morton's health, and received a cheering account. The recovery had been simply marvellous, simply miraculous; the doctors' calculations were quite thrown out.

“I suppose that does happen sometimes?” said Mrs. Lorimer, laughing.

“It is not an unprecedented occurrence, certainly,” replied Fane.

He had sat down beside Violet, and now turned—with an effort, she fancied—and asked how she was. She murmured “quite well,” and got up to look for a pair of scissors in her work-basket.

“I was just complimenting Violet upon her looks before you came,” said Mrs. Lorimer. “But,” folding her hands, and regarding him gravely, “I fear I cannot do the same to *you*, my dear Austin.”

“Indeed!” laughing a little. “What is the matter with my looks?”

Mrs. Lorimer shook her head. "They are very far indeed from what they should be—very, very far. You have been overworked and anxious, and," smiling, "just a little dull and disappointed, perhaps. You want a holiday and a change; and you must have both soon," she added significantly.

Luncheon was announced at that moment, and nothing more was said on the subject. The meal was a wretched ordeal to poor Violet; had it not been that their stay abroad provided abundant food for talk, she did not know how she might have betrayed herself. But Mrs. Lorimer was in capital spirits; relieved on her sister's account, glad to be at home, and eager for the accomplishment of the marriage; and she noticed nothing amiss. Violet was no quieter than usual; indeed, more than once she struck into the conversation quite animatedly, relating some exploits of Bertie, or mentioning some absurd episode. She was nervously anxious to keep the talk to these safe subjects. Mrs. Lorimer's interest in Wanningster, however, was still alert and undiminished, and her absence made her curiosity active about many people. She plied Fane with questions, and in due course, as Violet dreaded, brought in Miss Romney's name.

"What a pity about her illness!—such a

drawback when she must have been so anxious to leave the town! It would quite throw her back in her professional career. What a mistake for a woman to attempt such arduous work! When was the illness?"

"Dr. Fullagher was called in the day you left England," replied Fane, in a carefully composed tone, as if he had steeled himself beforehand.

"Really! It was sensible to have him—very sensible."

"I attended her too at the worst—she was dangerously ill."

Violet bent over her pet dog, apparently too absorbed in teaching it to beg to heed what was said. The studious reserve of Fane's voice and manner pained her as much for his sake as for her own—she could not look at him.

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Lorimer, with easy pity. "I am sorry to hear it—very sorry indeed. It is a great drawback for her. Do you know if she intends practising again?"

"Yes. She is going to start again."

"Where does she think of going to?"

"Ucclesfield."

"Ucclesfield! really! When will she go?"

"To-morrow."

"It is no good," exclaimed Violet, throwing herself back in her chair. "Carlo will *never*

learn to beg! He is the most atrocious dunce! I shall give up teaching him."

Her vehemence surprised her mother, who was not accustomed to bursts of impatience from her gentle daughter. She lost the thread of her questions.

Fane raised his eyes, and said, with a faint smile, and slight glance at Violet, "You spoil him, I think."

"Oh, no," she said, carelessly, rising as she spoke. "We have finished, I think, mamma. Shall we not go back to the drawing-room?"

"I hope you can stay a little, Austin?" said Mrs. Lorimer, as they crossed the hall.

He replied he was in no hurry.

"I will order the carriage for a drive later, then, Violet, my dear; and meanwhile, I will lie down. You will excuse me, I know—you must have much to say to each other. I hope," she said, looking smilingly from one to the other when within the drawing-room—"I hope you will be able to come to some definite agreement respecting the important matter. I am on your side, dear Austin, and I have entreated Violet to be propitious."

Having thus prepared the way for his solicitations, she bade him farewell for the present, and left them together.

Violet, who had received her mother's playfulness in dead silence, and with a white instead of a blushing face, slowly retreated to the further end of the long room, and there stood.

Fane was following, and glanced out of one of the windows as he passed.

"Won't you come out into the garden?" he said, speaking with an effort.

"Dr. Fane," said Violet, calmly and clearly.

He stopped where he was, and shot a quick, sharp glance at her. It had not been easy to look at her before, but he did so now, full. "Yes?"

"I have a favour to ask you."

"Yes?"

"I wish you to release me from my engagement," she said, composedly, and unfalteringly.

Fane started, and looked down. He reddened slightly.

"This is very sudden," he said, and the words came stammeringly. "I fear I have offended you—if you would tell me anything in which I have displeased you, I will do my best—" This was all that honesty allowed of the dismay a dismissed lover would naturally expect, and be expected, to betray, and of the passionate pleadings he would put forward.

"No," said Violet. "It is not for any such

reason, believe me. I feel that our engagement is a mistake. We do not suit each other. We could not make each other happy. It is better to part."

The consciousness of his utter inability to sincerely act the lover's part was inexpressibly galling to Fane. He felt taken completely at a disadvantage. His position was surely the most humiliating and embarrassing a man could find himself in. He could not express eager regret; he could not entreat her to re-consider her decision; he had no right to ask for reasons. Another man might have resented such a summary dismissal—he was too well aware he had no claim to resent anything from Violet, even had she chosen to add the bitterest reproaches to her request. Indeed, he almost wished she would stoop to reproach,—he could then have explained—have confessed the truth; reproaches would be better than the mortification of her silent judgment and rejection. But how can a man defend himself when he is not accused?

"I am sorry to have offended you," he said, slowly, for once in his life wholly at a loss for words.

"I repeat it is not for any such reason," said Violet, with gentle dignity. "Pray do not mistake me. It is not a question of accusations—

if any are to be made they must be made against me for my fickleness. I am quite willing it should be so. It is better to find out one's mind now than when it is too late. I have been dissatisfied for some time, and at length I am convinced that it is better for us to part."

"In that case," said Fane, with a low bend of the head, "I can only accept your dismissal."

Violet came a step or two forward, and held out her hand, smiling, and her smile was quite bright.

"Let us part friends," she said, making no apology for her abrupt dismissal.

Fane took her hand, and looked sadly and humbly at her.

"Forgive me," he said, very low.

So low, that though for a moment her composure faltered, she passed the words over unnoticed.

"Good-bye," she said, with smiling lips.

He repeated the word mechanically, and went away, feeling lowered to the lowest depths of his self-esteem, and as if Violet, gentle, yielding Violet, had given him a sharp rebuke.

Elation at his regained freedom was far enough away. Release from the burden of that distasteful engagement brought with it no gratification. He was saddened and humbled. He

felt bitterly remorseful for his careless entangling of Violet's affections—he had won her heart only half in earnest—he had wrouged her very cruelly. It was Violet he thought of on his slow walk homeward—Violet, gentle, sweet, trusting, and loving; and he mourned over his shortcomings towards her with sincere sorrow.

He had reached the outskirts of the town, and was mechanically leaving London Road to take the shorter cut by Princess Road, when a change of thought flashed into his mind. Edith! The name was like a warm sunbeam. He gazed at the empty, forsaken house with a kindling face, and a rush of tender, agitating emotions. The remembrance of her love revived his self-respect. His very step grew lighter. He must tell her—she must know that he was free before she went away.

The evening closed in chilly. Miss Jacques, always glad of an excuse for a fire, had caused a good one to be made in the drawing-room, and she and Edith sat one on either side of it—both idle, and both sad and thoughtful, in spite of the efforts each made at cheerfulness. It had been a busy, trying day, and Edith was tired. The approaching parting was sorrowful, and the future—regarded in the light of her lately gained

experience—was fuller of apprehension than of hopeful prospects.

It was about eight o'clock when Miss Jacques heard a footstep on the gravel path.

"Bill must have forgotten something," she observed. "It cannot be anyone calling at this hour."

Hannah shortly appeared, however, to say that her mistress was wanted. Someone wished to speak to her "very particularly," and Miss Jacques, supposing the someone to be one of her poor people, good-naturedly went at once.

Edith had not been alone more than five minutes, when the door was opened, and softly closed. The solitude, short as it was, had been intensely grateful to her—she had relaxed the guard upon her expression, and abandoned herself to her sorrowful thoughts unchecked. She had gone back to that parting in the field on Sunday morning, and was thinking with passionate love and pity of her lover's wretchedness, when the sound of the door brought her back to the present, and the necessity for exerting self-command.

"You have not been kept long," she said, the sound of tears in the attempt at cheerfulness of tone.

Then something made her raise her head, and

she saw, not Miss Jacques, but Austin Fane. She rose hastily from her chair, drawing back a little, and uttering a strange, suffering, "Ah!"

He came forward, and paused on the opposite side of the fire-place. He needed no interpretation of her quick movement and exclamation.

"I would not have troubled you under any circumstance except one," he said, quietly. "I came to tell you—I am free now."

For half a second a look of pain dilated the eyes fixed on his face, then it gave place to a merely inquiring expression.

"No," he said, "it was not my doing—it was hers."

Edith sank down in her chair again, still with eyes fixed on him.

"I meant to do what you wished," said Fane, in the same sad, monotonous voice. "I meant to keep my promise; but she has broken off the engagement. I don't know why—I had no right to ask questions—she gave no reason, I believe—only that we did not suit each other—that we should not be happy."

Edith covered her face with her hands.

Fane came a step nearer.

"I could not let you go without telling you—without asking for a hope that—that later—you will let me come to you—and—and tell you of

my love—and win you. May I—when I have waited long enough?”

She moved her hands, and saw him kneeling before her. Tears came into her eyes and fell over her cheeks.

She put out her right hand, and laid it lightly, almost shyly, on his shoulder for a brief instant.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, in a low, passionate, tender voice, “you have suffered so! I will try—oh, I will try to make you forget it and be happy again.”

He caught the gentle hand and clasped it between both his, and looked up with a sudden flushing and illumination of his whole face.

“And I may come?”

He read the answer in her eyes, and bent his head, and reverently kissed the hand he held.

THE END.

